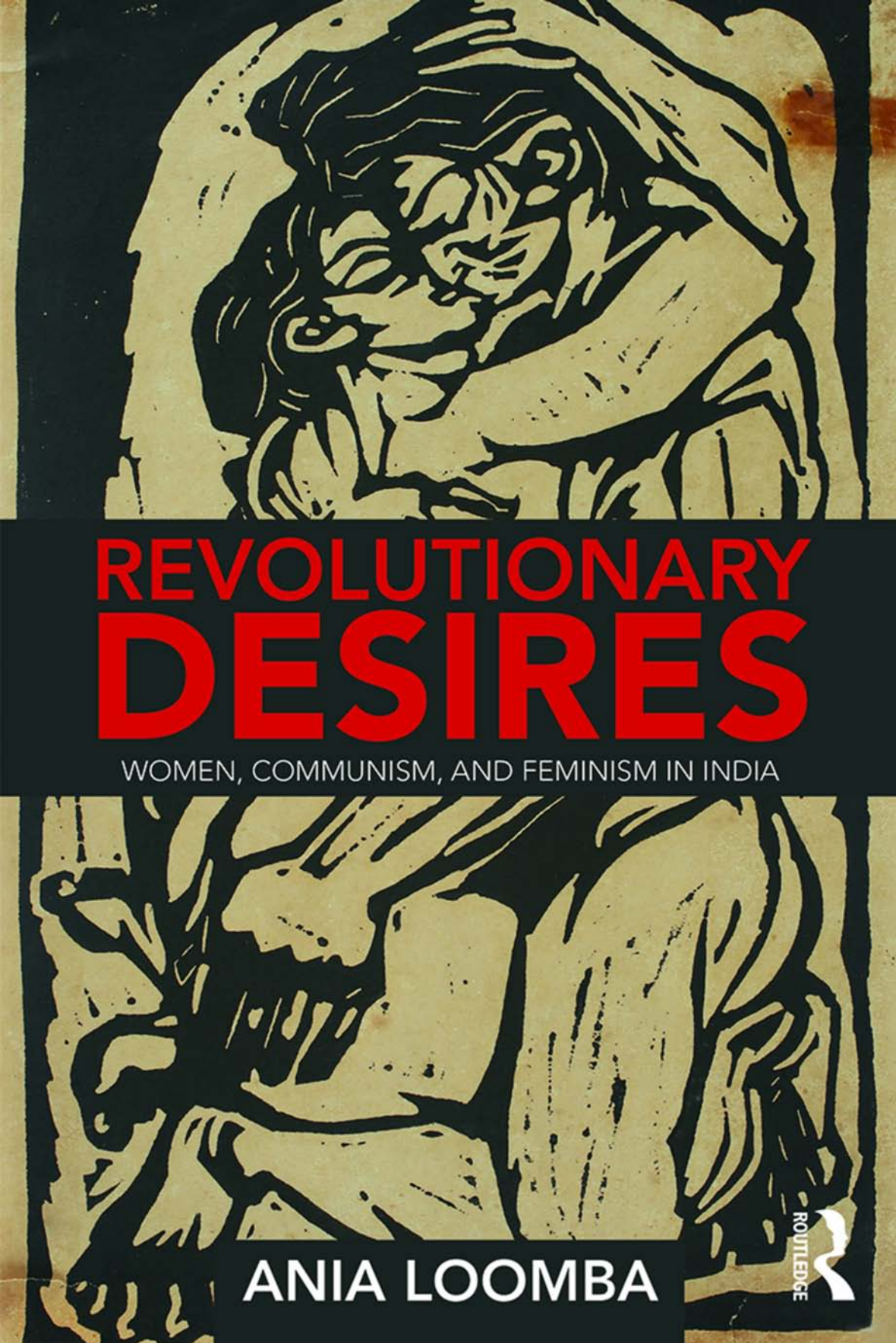
REVOLUTIONARY
DESIRES
WOMEN, COMMUNISM, AND FEMINISM IN INDIA
ANIA LOOMBA
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REVOLUTIONARY DESIRES

Revolutionary Desires examines the lives and subjectivities of militant-nationalist and communist women in India from the late 1920s, shortly after the communist movement took root, to the 1960s, when it fractured. This close study demonstrates how India's revolutionary women shaped a new female – and in some cases feminist – political subject in the twentieth century, in collaboration and contestation with Indian nationalist, liberal-feminist, and European left-wing models of womanhood.

Through a wide range of writings by, and about, revolutionary and communist women, including memoirs, autobiographies, novels, party documents, and interviews, Ania Loomba traces the experiences of these women, showing how they were constrained by, but also questioned, the gendered norms of Indian political culture. A collection of carefully restored photographs is dispersed throughout the book, helping to evoke the texture of these women's political experiences, both public and private.

Revolutionary Desires is an original and important intervention into a neglected area of leftist and feminist politics in India by a major voice in feminist studies.

Ania Loomba is the Catherine Bryson Professor of English at the University of Pennsylvania. She has published widely on early modern literature, histories of race and colonialism, postcolonial studies, feminist theory, and contemporary Indian literature and culture. Her publications include *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (2005) and *Shakespeare, Race, and Colonialism* (2002), as well as the edited collections *Postcolonial Studies and Beyond* (2005), *South Asian Feminisms* (2012), and *Rethinking Feminism in Early Modern Studies* (2016).

'In this inimitable feminist history of Indian women rebels and revolutionaries, Ania Loomba turns her well-trained eye on a shamefully under-written history of radical political desire in all its gendered forms. These pages are literally bursting with stories of militant and communist women who were nothing but trouble in and for modern Indian history.'

Antoinette M. Burton, Catherine C. and Bruce A. Bastian Professor of Global and Transnational Studies, University of Illinois, USA

FIGURE 0.1 Chittaprosad, 'Liberty'

(Courtesy: The Osian's Archive and Art Collection)

REVOLUTIONARY DESIRES

Women, Communism, and Feminism in India

Ania Loomba

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This book is dedicated to revolutionary women – past, present and future.

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INTRODUCTION

In Amrit Rai's 1952 Hindi novel *Beej* (Seed), a communist woman called Parvati Krishnaswamy makes a brief but remarkable appearance. It is ten o'clock at night, and the rain is pelting down outside the home of Pramila, a desperately unhappy young woman who, abandoned by her lover, is contemplating suicide. In a conventional society where marriages are usually arranged and take place within approved caste and kinship networks, to be abandoned by a lover is both a social and emotional disaster. Pramila did not know Parvati well when they were at college, but now Parvati spends four hours comforting and counselling Pramila before stepping out again into the rain. As Pramila later recounts, not only did Parvati restore 'my lost confidence in life' but she also inspired her by painting the picture of a new world in which patriarchal oppression would be dismantled (Rai 261).[1] In that brave new world, 'professional philanderers' (Parvati uses the term in English) like Pramila's ex-lover would be punished more harshly than thieves and murderers because 'in that classless society in which all will be equal [. . .] first of all men and women will be equal' (262). But Parvati warns Pramila that women would have to fight hard to bring that society into being; indeed, 'all the oppressed people will have to fight, and women, being the most oppressed, should lead that fight'. Pramila is not only deeply moved by Parvati's reaching out to her – 'After all, why did she come [. . .] so late at night, alone, in the rain? What brought her to me if not humanitarianism?' – but impressed by the choices Parvati has made in her own life:

> Where does she get her inspiration from? She was such a clever girl, why did she adopt such a hard life? A life of daily visits to worker's bastis [tenements] writing their missives, reading the newspapers out to them, sitting for hours amidst their squalor, their filthy children and filthy wives; then going away to far-off rural areas where there is no modern convenience, but, on the contrary, illness and one disease after another [. . .] above all there is famine [. . .] dry

> lakes, dry wells, shrivelled trees, destroyed crops, shrivelled cattle, shrivelled children [. . .] the black hungry offspring of a black hungry land [. . .]why does Parvati like to live among them and like them? [. . .] She could have been a lecturer in any college, or a barrister?
>
> (260–61)

Parvati's act of reaching out to Pramila, of counselling her and comforting her, what Pramila calls 'humanitarianism', might be thought of as feminist solidarity, if one was to use a vocabulary unknown to either Rai or communists of his time, including the women among them. Parvati is not alone; similar female figures, middle-class communist women who are deeply sensitive to women's oppression, appear in other fictions of the period.

Some, but not all, histories of Indian feminism acknowledge the work done by communist women in organizing labouring women; in forming the first women's organizations that would include poorer women, both urban and rural; and in fighting for women's rights to divorce, and property.[2] Qualifying these histories, however, is the commonplace assumption that such women relegated women's oppression to a second-order problem that would automatically vanish after the advent of socialism. This assumption is not entirely mistaken. The relationship between communist organizations and women's struggles the world over has been both intense and rocky. Scholars and activists alike have noted how Marxist movements and ideas opened up new spaces for women's political participation as well as personal emancipation but also foreclosed many. But if there is something similar in how women inhabited different Marxist organizations across the world, and how they experienced and contributed to the conversations and tensions between women's emancipation and social transformation, there is also a lot that is distinct and particular to each social and cultural ethos. In India, for instance, socialism and communism were from the very beginning intertwined with nationalism and anti-colonialism, which is hardly surprising in a colonized country. While the relationship between communism and nationalism has been widely examined, as has that between feminism and nationalism, the intersections between Marxism and feminism, especially as they were experienced by women and embodied in their lives, have barely begun to be explored.

Revolutionary Desires examines the lives and subjectivities of revolutionary and communist women of different classes in India from the late 1920s, shortly after the communist movement took root in India, to the 1960s, when it fractured. By 'revolutionary women', I mean those who were part of the militant and nationalist underground movements of the 1920s and 1930s, many of whom joined communist or socialist parties later. The communist women I deal with here belonged to the Communist Party of India (CPI) before it split into two in 1964.[3] (Although all the events and histories alluded to in this book cannot be explained and glossed in detail, a timeline is provided in Appendix 1, with brief notes on key histories in Appendix 2.) Unlike Parvati in *Beej*, most of them were not able to seamlessly knit together their commitment to India's freedom, to a classless society, and to gender equality. These

were theoretically complementary ideals, but in practice they could only be inhabited unevenly, for reasons that this book will explore. As I will argue, it is precisely this unevenness that is important for the many-stranded histories of feminism in India.

The lives of Indian communists, as Nalini Taneja has noted, 'have been ignored not only by the mainstream nationalist historians and the latter-day historians of the 'subaltern' and 'post-colonial' variety, but also studiedly avoided by the major Left historians themselves'. With some notable exceptions, this is even more true of communist women's lives, especially in the period covered by this book. When stories of communist women have been narrated, it is often to enumerate and extoll their public achievements, with little consideration of their everyday lives, particularly their domestic or emotional lives, or the debates that might have arisen within the organizations as a result of women's participation. This neglect is all the more striking because communist and other radical women in India did produce many personal narratives – autobiographies, memoirs, fragmentary accounts. Though fewer in number than those of their male comrades, and though many were not published, these narratives have been read perfunctorily and simply mined for facts about the political movements in which the women participated. In recent years, short recollections of Party leaders, as well as interviews with them, have been anthologized, sometimes at the behest of the Communist Parties themselves. But these too are produced in order to illustrate Party histories, not personal ones.[4]

Feminist scholars, it is true, have tried to explore alternative histories of left movements in India, largely through oral histories. The 1989 book, *We Were Making History*, was pioneering in recording and analysing women's memories of their participation in the Telangana uprising.[5] More recent feminist scholarship has interrogated women's experiences of the Tebhaga, Warli, and Naxalite uprisings (see Appendix 2 for a note on these movements).[6] Whereas these books focus on extraordinary or charged moments of rebellion, I am interested in exploring the more routine experiences of revolutionary women of different class and regional backgrounds, with a view to understanding the place of gender in the culture of communism (and indeed the place of communism in the cultures of feminism) in India.

To this end, *Revolutionary Desires* examines a range of writings by and about radical and communist women: memoirs, autobiographies, novels, Party documents, and newspaper articles, as well as interviews conducted by myself and others. Some of these women were famous, others obscure, and most identified as Marxist and were members of the Communist Party of India (CPI) or the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPM). None would have called themselves feminist. They all came to political consciousness fighting against British imperialism. A large number died with their partisan faith intact, many changed and grew with the movement, a few grew disillusioned with or became critical of the Party, and only a tiny percentage expressed their criticisms. All of them were extraordinary in making unexpected choices and going where their mothers could not have imagined, even if these journeys were to be seen later as incomplete by their daughters, among whom I count myself. My aim, however, is not to offer a new or alternative history of progressive and communist women's participation in politics. Rather, I want to trace their

experiences, through their own voices and memories where possible, in the hope that they will help us understand how these women shaped a new female – and in some cases feminist – political subject in India, in collaboration and contestation with Indian nationalist, liberal-feminist, and European left-wing models of womanhood.

Although the women who populate this book come from a range of geographic, religious, class and educational backgrounds, they do not encompass the diversity of Indian radical and communist women, partly because of the very particular genesis of this project. Like many inquiries into the past, mine has been impelled by my own life and upbringing. Both my parents were devoted communists, although until my father died in 1973, my mother did not have much time for political party work. She was too busy raising my sister and me and earning a living by teaching in a school, which we could therefore attend for free. Both my parents came from well-off backgrounds, and their political choices led them to live lives that were quite different from those of their own families.

To be raised by communists in India (or indeed in most parts of the world) was to inhabit a bifurcated world, or to learn to speak two languages.[7] We could not afford the same material comforts as our classmates or cousins, but our parents always saw to it that we had enough books. Material shortcomings were compensated for by the assurance of having a powerful ideal to work towards, nothing short of world transformation. The fact that my mother was the breadwinner, and my father a full-time political activist, also set us apart from every other family we knew. And yet, in many ways, the division of domestic labour was not that different, with my mother largely responsible for the everyday running of our lives. My sister and I were conscious of being raised as few others of our friends and peers were, with an enviable freedom denied to most young women in our India. But we often remarked that our friends would be able to talk to their mothers about boyfriends and sex, heartbreak and hope, in a way that we could not, perhaps because such a focus on the personal was seen as an unwelcome diversion from the struggles that really mattered. In later years, I brought this up with friends whose mothers were also part of the left movement. It seemed that their mothers, too, shared that particular quality of being at once supportive of and detached from us, radical in their attitudes to gender and yet curiously puritan. Our mothers – leftists who came of age in the crucible of anti-colonial nationalism – set themselves proudly apart from the usual narratives of wifedom and coupledom. Perhaps because of this, they did not always confront or critique the ways in which their lives had not broken away from these conventional narratives.

This contradiction was often exacerbated by the culture of 'whole-timers', or 'professional revolutionaries' as Lenin called them. In India, this created a cadre of people who became entirely dependent, economically and politically, upon the Party, and who were thus vulnerable to its dictates. It also placed enormous – indeed impossible – demands on them as they had to live and work on a Party wage that could barely pay for their transport and tea. A huge disparity was visible between those comrades who truly gave up whatever they might have inherited from their families, and lived nearly ascetic lives, and others who despite the profession of such sacrifice,

had resources that enabled them to survive the travails of a whole-timer with much greater ease and dignity. The stories I trace in the book make clear that women faced a special burden in whole-timer households. Usually, like my mother, they were the ones who took jobs to enable the political work of their husbands, or, if both were full time functionaries of the Party, then they had to make other critical and often painful decisions, such as not having children. Either way, as subsequent chapters show, it deeply affected relationships between husbands and wives, and attitudes to couple-dom as well as to masculinity and femininity.

Like many other Party children, I had a love–hate relationship with my parents' professed ideals. It was only when, at 17, I lost my father that I was propelled into a more direct connection with left politics, working first in the students' front and later in the women's front of the CPI. By that time, in the mid 1970s, the women's movement in India had entered a new phase, articulating the need to address domestic violence against women, female sexual rights, and women's autonomy as issues distinct from questions of poverty and class stratification. Older communist women were confronted by a different vocabulary that sometimes puzzled them, and of which they sometimes disapproved. Many of them reached out to younger women, however, joining them in public campaigns over these issues and contributing their rich experience while expanding their own political horizons. Still, many others staunchly proclaimed that they could never be 'feminists' even as their own lives could be read as blazing new trails for women and politics in India. There were some, like my mother, who could do both at once, forging important conversations between the Party women and younger feminists while still maintaining:

> Ours is not a feminist movement. Our fight is not directed against men but against the social, economic and political institutions that exploit both men and women. Our programme of attaining for our women full human dignity and winning for them their rights as mothers, workers and citizens, is inseparable from the struggle of our toiling people for democracy, secularism, socialism and peace.
>
> (Primla Loomba; quoted in Chakravartty and Chotani xii)

While the linking of women's issues with questions of social justice in general has been a hallmark of not just Marxist but also many anti-colonial struggles, formulations like this one were aimed specifically at the newer feminist vocabularies, which were understood as bourgeois in their insistence that gender could not be subordinated to class.

Communist women across generations were partly reacting to the reverse caricature – that of the left movement as completely gender-blind – which also gained currency as the new feminist movements grew. In India, both positions seemed especially reductive, since on the one hand there were no women's groups that discounted poverty or advocated female separatism, and, on the other hand, the left had in fact been central to the history of women's rights in India. And in practice, women's groups across these divides came together on crucial issues, including

dowry and rape, to launch the new wave of women's movements in the 1970s. But the history I want to trace is not just an intellectual one. Even as left-wing women were at the forefront of many struggles for gender equality – and indeed one could argue, as I will in this book, that many of them *were* feminists whether or not they identified as such – by the time I was politically active, most of them did not address the deeply gendered nature of their own organizations, or the conservative attitudes of their cadres, thus replicating patterns towards which they felt discomfort or frustration.

Like many women of my generation, I was transformed by experience working with the anti-dowry and anti-rape campaigns in Delhi, organizing demonstrations, going to police stations to argue about the registration of dowry murders, as well as by cases of sexual harassment. Many of these activities were undertaken on behalf of the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) in which CPI women worked, even though it was not officially the Party's women's front. Occasionally I wrote for *New Age,* the CPI paper, on questions of women and gender. The editor was a friend of mine, and he hinted that he had gotten into trouble for publishing a piece in which I had argued that party members should neither give nor take dowry. This is in fact what we were asking college students to pledge. But the unofficial wisdom in the Party was that while certainly communists should not *take* dowry when their sons married, it was impossible for them not to *give* it because their daughters would then remain unmarried! Many comrades accused me of being unreasonable when I argued that their daughters could find grooms on their own, or that it might even be better for them to remain unmarried. I was being 'overly idealistic', I was told. It was futile to argue that, surely, some idealism about gender relations was not misplaced in a party which declared that people should not be attached to property, or land, or religion.

There were many occasions that reminded me – and others like me – that despite regularly extolling the achievements of women under socialism, many older male comrades (and some women too) remained extraordinarily attached to the prototype of a modest and well-behaved Indian woman. After a class on Marxist philosophy for example, I happened to take a cigarette from a fellow student. Our teacher, like most male comrades at the time, smoked heavily but he was shocked at my action, and had no qualms in telling me that it was a horrible sight to see me smoke. When I pointed out that he was smoking himself, he said that a cigarette was as incongruous with my 'innocent face' as a beard would be. In other words, smoking threatened to render me masculine. But at the same time, excessive displays of femininity were also frowned upon. Another Party leader, one who had been a rebel against party hierarchy and conservatism in his own time, gravely told me that my silver jewellery made me look like a 'South Sea islander'. A friend was reprimanded because her sleeveless sari blouse had exposed her armpit when she raised her arm to give the 'red salute'.

Then there was the question of culture. For several years, I worked in the cultural squad of the All India Students' Federation and we tried to revive some of the old music of the 1940s that had been popularized by the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) in its heyday, including the songs of Bhupen Hazarika,

Faiz Ahmed Faiz, and Makhdoom Mohiuddin.[8] We sang at demonstrations and rallies, at trade union and workers meetings and Party events, occasionally travelling out of the city. Although such activities were regarded as 'lightweight' by the Party bosses, our music always aroused nostalgia among many of the older comrades. They spoke of those golden years during the 1940s and 1950s when famous writers and musicians were part of the left movement. My mother could recite various songs and *nazms* that were written by communist and progressive poets during the Bengal Famine, or the Telangana uprising, as well as lyrics from communist dramatist Sheila Bhatia's musical *Heer Ranjha*. All the Party 'aunties' I knew said they had acted and sung and danced, in public meetings and rallies, and ordinary folk had thronged in their hundreds to hear them. During the years of the Bengal Famine, in particular, they said, music and theatre were integral to Party work. Indeed, accounts of the left movement have credited it, and particularly the women within it, with developing music and theatre as a form of political outreach (Chakravartty, *Communists* 157–60). But this past didn't seem to have any bearing upon how Party leaders thought about culture in the 1970s. I was specifically told that, as my father's daughter, I should concentrate on 'real' politics instead of wasting my time in this *naach-gana* (dancing and singing).

What had happened to so drastically change attitudes to literature and culture? Relatedly, what had happened to the culture of the movement itself? At one level, the women of my mother's generation appeared feisty and fun-loving; they had also acted in unconventional ways and had chosen their own partners, often across religious and regional divides. Like my mother, many came from affluent families and had studied at good universities. Long-term commitment to party life, however, required these women to navigate a different matrix of constraints, which put their radical tendencies to the test. They had given up an inheritance of comfort to live simple, often spartan lives, in less than comfortable homes (though they didn't usually socialize across class divides). Others had gone even further, moving to villages or industrial areas in order to live alongside the workers they organized. Some of these hardships had inevitably bred a valorization of asceticism, a kind of strictness with respect to appearance, clothing, and possessions that was both admirable and frustrating. Growing up, I had overheard snippets of conversations about aspects of their lives that are never written about. I heard about the *farzi shadis* or contract marriages, wherein women were enjoined to marry particular men by the Party, or simply entered arrangements to 'protect' themselves from the dangers of being single, often when they were underground while the Party was banned. I had heard about how they danced with abandon on the tables in the Party communes, and about love affairs and sexual tensions within their community. Over time, however, so thoroughly were these issues exorcised from discussion that it began to seem to me that I had imagined these conversations from many years ago. As I grew up, it appeared that the Party women I knew had drawn a *lakshman-rekha* – an un-crossable line – around their own choices, regarding it as dangerous and unseemly for women to go still further. Almost to the last woman, they disavowed feminism as bourgeois and Western, and some of them made shockingly homophobic statements. Although they did not consider it necessary for women to either marry or have children,

the monogamous nuclear family remained an implicit ideal. My mother, too, inhabited this mixture of radicalism and prudishness. While enormously supportive of women who broke the bounds of convention, she was unable to talk about emotion or sexuality with her daughters. She expected them to be strong and independent women, and indeed helped them become so, but always with a sense that female strength demanded putting one's emotional self in cold storage.

How does one get to the other side of this type of silence? Jo Stanley, working in the British context, found that communist life-stories, written and oral, often tend to suppress the personal because

> much Communist autobiography is written by men who carry the burden symbolised by being shaven and wearing a clean ironed shirt; they write as people who felt they had to act as an example for others and a credit to the party. It was not and is not done in a metaphorical mix of old work trousers, dressing-gown, shorts and favourite fancy dress. The guard cannot be let down.
>
> (60)

In contrast to memoirs, Stanley suggests that fiction can be an especially useful way of accessing the personal that is excluded in such narratives. Commenting on the relative absence of memoirs by women, she also contends that women, 'as the emotionally literate sex, are more likely to talk about our personal life than men, but are less likely to be published or interviewed' (62). The memoirs of communist women, then, ought to be far more revealing than those of men. But this is certainly not always true. For example, Bengali communist Manikuntala Sen's autobiography *Shediner Katha* (the English version is called *In Search of Freedom*: *An Unfinished Journey*), has not a single sentence about her married life with another Party comrade, Jolly Kaul, but Kaul's own memoir, *In Search of a Better World* (written in English), spends many chapters on their marriage, domesticity and relationship. The difference may stem from Manikuntala's being a more important and visible leader within the Communist Party or from the fact that Kaul wrote his story nearly 30 years after his wife told hers, well after he had left the Party. But Manikuntala's book comes much closer to the tradition of communist autobiography that Stanley identifies: that of the 'starched shirt' – or shall we call it the starched sari?

I will return to Manikuntala Sen and Jolly Kaul's narratives in later chapters, but my point here is that in writing, as in life, gender is refracted through status, in this case within the Party and in public, as well as through class, especially in India where the Party's members ranged from English-speaking, foreign-educated youth to mill workers and poor peasants. Kavita Panjabi has also identified key differences between the ways in which urban and rural, middle-class and peasant activists of the Tebhaga movement chose to talk about themselves. The urban women tended to talk about their early life experiences, their education, and how they grew to political consciousness; peasant women, by contrast, did not have any elaborate narratives of education, childhood and development. Their stories began with their involvement in the movement and tended to be more 'non-linear, episodic, and imagistic'

('Testimony' 250). It would not be unfair to conjecture that middle- and upper-class women would also be more tight-lipped when it came to talking about their personal lives. In a parallel instance, while describing the British left, Jo Stanley writes:

> I have been party to hours of pub gossip about what is not on the official agenda, particularly dysfunctional families, adultery and homo-sexuality. As a woman and latterly as a counsellor I have heard – absolutely without a tape recorder – deeply personal even 'shocking' information that is excluded from more presentable Socialist autobiographical narratives. I think this kind of history matters and want it included, so that fuller histories exist for posterity.
>
> (61)

Yes, this history matters, but how does one recover it if those who lived it do not share, or do so very circumspectly?

Because these contradictions shaped my own life so intimately, I began to think of interviewing some of the women I had known as a young girl, and of asking them to reflect on these silences. I had planned to speak to women I had personally known, thinking that familiarity would facilitate open conversations and that it would be productive to interweave their memories of left culture and gender with my own from a much later period. I talked about this with friends and family for quite a few years, starting in earnest only when my mother reminded me that most such women were dead or very old, or ill and unable to talk. I had better get to it fast, she advised, or there would be no one left. I should note that throughout the years that I have been gathering material to write this book, she has been simultaneously supportive and puzzled, by my efforts, her range of reactions encapsulating precisely the contradictions that impelled me to embark upon it in the first place. Moreover, as I started to write, it became clear to me that I myself shared some of the same inhibitions I sensed in my mother and her comrades. I found it very hard to talk about myself, even as my own life as a Party child enabled me to explore particular aspects of revolutionary and communist lives and narratives.

I found too that the snippets of gossipy memories I heard as a young girl were not only occasional but also pertained to issues that could not be easily discussed, even in interviews, even after so many years. In some cases, the women I spoke to asked me not to publish what they had said. Sometimes they were too old to speak at length, or preoccupied with their own problems at the time. Indeed, I learnt as much about what it feels like to grow old as a radical woman in India, as I did about women's politics or sexuality. But however incomplete, these conversations directed me to memoirs and autobiographies that communist women had written, some of which had been published, others not. Some were written in languages that I did not know and that I could access only by working with translators. These life-stories in turn led me in turn to novels and other writings that thickened and complicated the autobiographical narratives. These multiple materials, I believe, help us understand 'communist self-fashioning' in modern India.

Rajarshi Dasgupta uses this evocative phrase in his account of the 'making of a communist ethos' – an account that included 'everyday attitudes to morality, exercises of power, moments of domination and calculations of usefulness with regard to the larger social world' (71). The British social historian Raphael Samuel also addresses such self-fashioning in his memoir of growing up within the fold of the Communist Party. Samuel writes of the compelling need for communists to create a complete social identity, one that transcended the limits of class, gender, and nationality:

> Like practising Catholics or Orthodox Jews, we lived in a little private world of our own. [. . .] Like Freemasons we knew intuitively when someone was 'one of us' and we were equally quick to spot that folk devil of the socialist imagination, a 'careerist', a species being of whom I am, to this day, wary. [. . .] Communists were a 'peculiar' people and as the Cold War drew in, they reverted to the status of pariahs. But it seems to me that we had more in common with the national culture than we realized at the time. [. . .] Above all, we shared with other formations in Britain, a patriarchal system of authority, in which people looked upwards rather than downwards for their cues, and where authority expected to be automatically obeyed.
>
> (12–13)

Samuel's remarks are pertinent for the Indian context – Indian communists also attempted to create an alternative and holistic world that nevertheless 'had more in common with the national culture' than they would admit.

Dasgupta criticizes the dominant narrative about Indian communism that circulates among communists themselves, one that suggests that the movement was healthy and strong in the past and then it subsequently deteriorated, partly because of communists' own complicity with the existing power structures and ideologies. Against such nostalgia, Dasgupta suggests that it is important to scrutinize the early years of the Party to understand how the ideals of communism that were advanced then were responsible for long-lived habits of thought and behaviour, and indeed for the social conservatism and complicity with power that many commentators see in the later years of the communist movement in India (68). *Revolutionary Desires* argues that gender relations were absolutely central to such communist self-fashioning and that they allow us to trace continuity as well as change within the movement. Further, while Dasgupta concentrates on Bengal, my own explorations include other locales – Punjab and the United Provinces, Maharashtra, Andhra, and Delhi – in order to enable reflection upon the creation of a larger 'national' communist culture. An exclusive focus on particular regions has been the hallmark of existing scholarship on revolutionary and communist movements. In moving away from such exclusivity, I wish to suggest the need to think about a pan-Indian communist ethos.

I must offer a word of caution here. The feminist dictum 'the personal is political' was coined to challenge the privileging of organized or public action and to insist that acts relegated to the domestic and private are crucial to destabilizing and changing

the social order. In that sense, its most radical thrust was to question the conceptual bifurcation of these two spheres. However, many strands of feminist scholarship, in describing the 'private' domain excluded by a narrowly understood 'public sphere', have ended up treating the two as distinct. The bifurcation of private and public – a benchmark of liberal thought – is only deepened if we do not also simultaneously insist that the political is also deeply personal. And vice versa. As Nivedita Menon puts it, 'the existence of a private realm is dependent on the very discourse which posits its distinction from the public. The 'private', already deeply penetrated by the 'public', is in fact constructed and maintained by it' ('Abortion' 117). Paradoxically, then, when certain Marxist ideologues or organizations claimed that it was 'bourgeois' to pay attention to personal lives, they were endorsing a very liberal – and bourgeois – division of the individual and the collective.

Moreover, it is possible to simply reverse the bias of mainstream political and historical analysis and privilege 'the private' to the point where we neglect or downplay the importance of women's activities in the public sphere. Tanika Sarkar argues that this is precisely what has happened in recent scholarship on India. On the one hand, as she points out, 'the domestic and the private were reinterpreted as realms of autonomy, self-making'; but on the other hand, 'women's actual, intentional political work as world-transformative and self-transformational activity' has been understood as a sphere in which women are largely manipulated or marginalized by men ('Political Women' 541). This is why, she suggests, 'those movements which don't have an explicitly feminist agenda have not been taken seriously by feminists after the first generation of feminist scholars' (545). The communist movement in particular has suffered from this scholarly bias, partly because several recent studies have shown how it marginalized women, and partly because communist scholarship itself has ignored:

> the social and political intricacies of communist lives in historical works, autobiographies and biographies – in a virtually exclusive preoccupation with party programmes and lines. Even thick descriptions of their political experience as a part of their everyday lives have hardly been studied. Communist women have thus been doubly marginalized: in Communist and in feminist histories.
>
> (557)

As a result, the 'highly radical refashioning of communist domesticities, familial worlds, gender relations' has been obscured from view (557).

It is precisely this radical refashioning that I examine in this book, tracing both those moments which suggest a reshaping of norms and practices as well as those which show the enduring capacity of conventions to limit change. I also want to keep in view the fact that all such attempts to refashion the domestic and the worldly worked against the powerful traditional bifurcation of the public and the private domains. This is after all the divide that in the first place denied or limited the political

participation of Indian women, as well as shaped the social terrain on which Indian Marxists lived and worked.

*

Communist self-fashioning did not take place in an ideological or social space of its own. Especially when it came to questions of gender and sexuality, communists were as deeply influenced by nationalist ideas and practices as they were by Marxist or revolutionary ones; indeed, the former provided the lens through which they viewed and appropriated the latter. As we know, male nationalists insisted on the divide between a public sphere in which they could meet and best colonial officials, and a private sphere of religion, culture, and domesticity that was to remain immune to any colonial intervention. Women activists both contested this division and were trapped within it. Partly because women's emancipation in India was, as in large parts of the colonized world, intertwined complexly with the struggle for independence, feminist scholarship on India has always been sharply conscious of the historical connections between women's personal, sexual, and political freedoms and the larger structures of social power. It has traced how, from the late nineteenth century onward, Indian women offered critiques of their subordination and, later, fought to change their place at home and in the world, while actively participating in movements for social and anti-colonial emancipation.

However, the question of women's emancipation often gets subsumed into a discussion of these other movements or histories. This trend has been bolstered by an influential strand of (largely male) scholarship that positions women not as active participants in nationalist debates about freedom, but rather as the *grounds* of such debates. So thoroughly were women shaped by these debates, these writers imply, that they could only visualize their freedom in terms set by men. Particularly important here is Partha Chatterjee's influential account of 'the women's question' in Indian nationalism, which focuses on the dilemma of male nationalists who had to deal with increasing pressure from British colonists to reform the status of women. How could they do so without also relinquishing control of the family and women to their colonial masters? Chatterjee suggests that Indian nationalists resolved the problem by positing a division between an external 'material' world where they could adopt the attributes which had given Europeans global dominance ('science, technology, rational forms of economic organization, modern methods of statecraft') and an inner spiritual-cultural domain of the 'home' (which included women, domesticity, and religion) that was understood as superior to Western forms, and where nothing would be conceded to the colonizers (244). Nationalists asserted their power by claiming that indigenous 'cultural' and religious traditions were sacrosanct, and that Indian men alone could decide what reforms and changes could take place in this domain. This included the sphere of women's education and their status in society, both of which the British had criticized as backward. Reformed but contained, the Indian woman was thus a joint upon which nationalist thought pivoted.

As feminist scholars have pointed out, Chatterjee's argument focuses on male nationalist anxieties about cultural identity. When he does turn to women, Chatterjee finds that their ''autonomous subjectivity' is to be found in the domestic archives of home rather than 'the external domain of political conflict'' (Gopal 61–62).[9] Dipesh Chakrabarty's equally influential argument about the difficulty of writing an authentically Indian history also pivots around the Hindu woman and her attachments to a reformed yet essentially Indian home. In 'Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History', Chakrabarty suggests that Western ideas of progress, which insisted on the 'backwardness' of Indian women and the Indian family, were so pervasive among the colonized that we cannot easily find historical evidence of any Indian thought that stood outside their restrictive logic. But he locates a resistant consciousness at work in some women's accounts of the superiority of the extended Hindu family. These accounts suggested that, in distinction to Western women's embrace of a shameless individualism and self-indulgence, 'freedom' for Indian women lay in embracing a Hindu model of modesty and in wifely service to the extended family, as well as contentment with very little. Chakrabarty insists that these women's arguments for a home-grown Hindu upper-caste patriarchy indicate not an atavistic nativism but a political consciousness that escapes or resists the emancipatory logic of Western Enlightenment thought.

Certain nineteenth-and early twentieth-century Bengali texts seem to corroborate the overlapping patterns outlined by Chatterjee and Chakrabarty. For example, Shanti, a radiant and militant young woman who leaves her home to join the rebels, is at the heart of *Anandmath* (1882), Bankimchandra's enormously popular novel depicting a Hindu mendicant-led rebellion against Muslim rulers. When Shanti absconds, she does so not to claim equality with men in the public world, but rather to enable her husband Jibananda to fight freely without being torn between his duty to the cause and his desire for her. She insists that once she joins the rebellion, she is no longer a woman but a chaste warrior. This means that Jibananda can now live and fight alongside her and yet not break his vow of renouncing all family ties, especially conjugal ones. By shedding her womanliness, she can actually play the role of the perfect Hindu wife: 'My husband is great to me, but my duty is greater than him, and his duty is greater than my duty' (Chatterji 202).

Shanti is no ordinary woman; she becomes a goddess. Even the monk who has decreed the ascetic code for male warriors is in awe of her, admitting, 'So far I have called only our country Mother. [. . .] Now I call you Mother too.' Shanti thus articulates a version of the 'freedom in obedience' that Chakrabarty locates in Bengali housewives ('Postcoloniality' 14). The novel also suggests a division between the inner and outer world that resonates with Chatterjee's argument about the rhetorical forms of Indian nationalism. The *sanyasi* rebellion in which Shanti and Jibananda participate is aimed at creating a Hindu nation; in order to achieve this, the novel suggests, the *sanyasis* must mobilize the Hindu populace, which has been long suppressed by Muslim rulers. Although these rulers are backed by the British, the colonizers are actually not the real enemies of Hindus; instead, they possess the 'outward knowledge' that Hindus must acquire in order to 'reinstate [. . .] the true

Hindu rule of life' (Chatterji 229). But it is important to note that, whereas Chatterjee analyses the philosophy of *liberal* nationalism, *Anandmath* indicates the making of a stridently militant and *illiberal* Hindu nationalism. The novel alerts us to the intricate relationship between these two conceptions of the nation, and reminds us that the image of the ideal Hindu woman was in fact central to *both*. Despite their debates about the extent to which Hindu women and families were to be modernized, there were striking similarities between orthodox Hindu nationalism and liberal nationalism (which was also predominantly high-caste and Hindu).[10]

Further, it was colonial law that had laid the grounds for the public/private distinction by moulding the public sphere according to European legal mores while emphasizing religion and custom as the basis for personal law. In this way, *colonial policies* created the grounds for the indigenous patriarchal position that women, family, and culture were off-limits to the colonizers (O'Hanlon 51). Thus both liberal and illiberal nationalists were arguably simply reacting to colonial distinctions, rather than carving out a new strategy in dividing the home from the world. When it came to women, colonial and indigenous patriarchal positions mirrored one another – the ideal of a woman who is devoted to family and hearth was as much Victorian as it was Hindu (Borthwick 55–56). Women were quick to point out that the rhetoric of cultural and religious difference that Indian men used was belied by the collaboration between nationalists of all stripes and the British.

As early as 1882, Tarabai Shinde, in a book called *A Comparison Between Women and Men* (written in Marathi), had exposed the overlap between the older conservative attitudes to women and the positions of the new reformers. She, like other women, also pointed out that Indian men mirrored and mimicked colonizers despite their strenuous claims to difference:

> You keep on trying to be just like them, yet you go on about them not putting their hands in our religion! [. . .] You turn yourselves into real live sahibs . . . then you turn around and claim you're great defenders of dharma! Aren't you even a bit ashamed of saying it?
>
> (O'Hanlon 52–53)

Tarabai suggested that the increasing restrictions on women, such as the disapproval of widow remarriage, were a sign of the intensification of indigenous patriarchy, and that they were spreading even among groups that did not adhere to them previously. 'Far from seeing the home and family as some sacrosanct domain', Rosalind O'Hanlon notes, Tarabai 'positively demanded state intervention to make it easier for women to live and marry independently, and to punish men who corrupt the innocent' (32, 53). Many other women made similar demands, both as individuals and, later, through public campaigns.

In a famous 1887 case, Rukhmabai, an educated daughter of a Bombay doctor, refused to cohabit with the much older man to whom she had been married as a child. In her appeal to the government, she asked Queen Victoria to amend Indian law and render child marriages illegal. Her husband sued her on the grounds that she was his

rightful property, but lost the case under civil law. However, the Chief Justice bowed to the conservative demand that she be tried under Hindu law, and finally Rukhmabai was ordered to go and live with her husband. (It is worth pointing out, though, that Rukhmabai eventually qualified as a doctor in London, and became one of the earliest practising woman doctors in India). In a book called *The High Caste-Hindu Woman* (1888), Pandita Ramabai, scholar, educationist and reformer, charged that the case revealed a functional alliance between the colonial government and Indian men in questions involving women. Ramabai was championed by Jyotirao Phule, the anti-caste thinker and activist, who suggested that high-caste women were as victimised by the caste order as lower-castes and untouchables (O'Hanlon 18–19). Thus, much of the discourse that some scholars take as representative of a pan-Indian nationalism was actually a very particular high-caste male variety. In 1910, a distinguished courtesan and woman of letters called Bangalore Nagaratnamma reprinted an epic poem in Telugu, *Radhika Santwanam*, which had been written in the late eighteenth century by another courtesan, Muddupalani. There was a furore – Indian men protested the publication, saying that the poem was overtly sexual. In turn, the British courts banned the poem. Although the ban was lifted after Independence in 1947, the text continued to be 'decreed out of existence ideologically' (Tharu and Lalita 160–61).

Far from just writers and reformers acting individually, the earliest women's campaigns also, as Mrinalini Sinha has shown, 'challenged the division of home and world by exposing the reluctance of both the imperial state and male nationalists to "reform" women's positions' (623).[11] Their efforts showed that nationalists had thus not 'resolved' the women's question, as Chatterjee would have it, but rather had used 'the glorified femininity of women' as 'the ground on which to render *their* [i.e. the women's] political demands illegitimate' (Nair 61). Indian women's struggles against indigenous and colonial patriarchies remind us that the division between home and the world, or private and public, was invoked to constrain female activity, and invoked most stridently when such a division was challenged or unstable. For this reason, it has shaped the terms of women's entry into the public sphere from the late nineteenth century to, arguably, the present day. Because the idealized images of femininity in the discourses of reformists, conservatives and colonialists alike pivoted upon a division between the home and the world, women who threatened the divide – by earning a living, by participating in politics, or simply for pleasure – faced the charge of immorality.

Therefore, all political movements and leaders that sought to include women had to deal with, modify, or appropriate existing ideas of public and private spheres. The most influential, and most widely examined by scholars, was Gandhi's redefinition of the boundaries of home. There is a vast literature on the complex and often contradictory demands Gandhi made upon women, and I will not dwell on these here, beyond emphasizing that Gandhi's ability to bring women out into the public sphere depended upon his reshaping the ideal of a good Hindu wife and mother.[12] Gandhi insisted that women had an obligation to attend to the good of society as a whole rather than only to their families and homes. At first suggesting that women should

strengthen the nation within the spatial confines of their homes, Gandhi eventually called upon them to come out in large numbers, to picket shops selling liquor and to join in the salt *satyagraha* and other campaigns. However, he was especially careful to frame his campaign as preserving the patriarchal family: women campaigners were the new Sitas, out to destroy Ravana while remaining faithful to Ram (Kumar 83). An ideal of the strong but non-confrontational woman shaped Gandhi's vision of non-violent resistance. For him, the poet Mirabai embodies such an ideal, being a woman who, according to legend, rejected marriage and domesticity for a higher cause (devotion to the god Krishna), but by dint of her chastity and virtue converted her detractors (including her husband) into believers. Like Mirabai, women could venture forth while still remaining within the bounds of decorous femininity.

Just as women's struggles for reform of the family led to intense political battles in the public sphere, their participation in nationalist mobilizations could, conversely, arouse domestic and familial crises. Gandhi was at pains to contain such crises, emphasizing that the gendered division of labour within the family was proper to its smooth functioning, even when women served the nationalist cause: it was 'degrading both for men and woman that women should be called upon or induced to forsake the hearth and shoulder the rifle for the protection of that hearth. It is a reversion to barbarity' (quoted in Kishwar 1699). Sucheta Kriplani, a well-known Congress leader, credited 'Gandhi's personality' with ensuring that 'when women came out and worked in the political field, their family members knew that they were quite secure, they were protected' (quoted in Forbes 125–26). For Gandhi, female strength lay in woman's sexual restraint, as well as in her ability to resist male lust, even within marriage (and if necessary, like Mirabai, to break marital and domestic ties to guard her purity). The ideal woman, of course, like the ideal man, would renounce sexual activity altogether, as did Sucheta and her husband J. B. Kriplani. (The always irreverent Urdu writer Saadat Hasan Manto was to satirize the ethos of chastity within Gandhi's movement in his searing short story 'Rubber'.) Satyagrahis should also embrace poverty; Gandhi appealed to women in particular to cast off ornaments that were 'an offence to the eye', for in 'this country of semi-starvation of millions', a woman's best ornaments were her virtue and modesty (quoted in Kishwar 1696).

Gandhi's insistence that nationalist women were in fact 'good' women answered accusations that women who came out onto the streets were 'street women', either literally or metaphorically. There was a context for such reassurance: in 1934, Cornelia Sorabji, social reformer and the first woman advocate in India, had claimed that women were pulled out of rescue homes to join the Congress's civil disobedience movement and that 'in the Punjab, 90 per cent of the women arrested for political crimes and offences are prostitutes' (74). Sorabji was deploying this analogy between acceptable politics and acceptable gender roles to attack Gandhi, but he used the same equation to great advantage to legitimize his own politics and delegitimize other forms of protest. Unsurprisingly, he was 'almost hysterical with rage' when prostitutes were actually drawn into the movement in Bengal: such women were worse than thieves, he wrote, because they 'stole the virtue of society' (Kumar 83–84).

Gandhi also used the comparison between non-normative sexualities and deviant politics to disparage women in revolutionary movements who were, in his view, abnormal and 'unsexed' (Forbes 155).

Partly because Gandhian nationalism powerfully shaped political culture at large, there was pressure upon *all* politically active men and women to espouse this downplaying of the sexually active self, even if they did not follow it to the letter.[13] Even before Gandhi came onto the political scene, of course, the ideals of sexual renunciation and political devotion were tightly braided, and therefore, many women appropriated the discourse of glorified Hindu femininity for their own purposes. For example, revolutionary-nationalist women in Bengal in the 1920s invoked the figure of Shanti in *Anandmath* as they demanded to be let into militant organizations that embraced the creed of male asceticism. (It is to be noted that they were all upper-caste and Hindu themselves). Most of them did not contest asceticism as an ideal; in fact, they insisted that that they too could embrace it. But there were dissident voices among them that mocked this creed while also critiquing existing norms of marriage.

In the early revolutionary movements, resistance largely took the form of militant and spectacular actions, from train robberies and shootings to the hurling of bombs – actions that confirm rather than challenge established forms of heroism. In her study of Naxalite women, Mallarika Sinha Roy suggests that

> in communist writings, gender ambivalent notions of courage and activism emerge [. . .] female bodies also come to represent qualities of masculine activism. Revolutionary women, who are lauded for their courage and resourcefulness, become de facto 'men', and they are also implicitly turned into absolute markers of chaste femininity.
>
> (25)

But surely when 'female bodies also come to represent masculine activism' the result is not only 'gender ambivalent notions of courage and activism', but also, more fundamentally, a confirmation of gender binaries. When strong women are turned into 'de facto men', the equation of courage and activism with action and manliness is emphasized. Paradoxically, in a sense, Gandhi's refashioning of his own body and his constant referencing of female strength undercut this equation of masculinity and power, and were in one sense more unorthodox.

Further, as Suruchi Thapar-Bjorkert points out, the 'equation of political activity with the public sphere' was enshrined in the historiography of the nationalist movement, thus ensuring that 'the nationalist contributions women made from within the domestic sphere were silenced' (43). To offer an alternative perspective on nationalist affiliation, Thapar-Bjorkert interviewed middle-class women who were far more bound by domestic roles than elite women, but who nevertheless had strong affinities with the nationalist movement. They expressed these affinities in a multitude of ways, including by passing on nationalist ideals to their children even when the rest of the family did not hold these views. But sometimes even the respondents

themselves 'believed that if they had not stepped out of their homes in the public domain, "they were not nationalist"' (45).

Valuable as this work is in making visible previously neglected methods and subjects of political action, it can, ironically, serve to reinforce the divide between the public and the private, the political and the domestic.[14] Not only can the two not be theoretically demarcated, as I have already pointed out, but women's political activities spanned both domains, especially when they were part of underground movements. Political activities were carried out under cover of domesticity, which thus became an arena of political activity in itself. Revolutionary and communist women play-acted as the wives, aunts, and sisters of their male comrades and they regularly hid firearms and bombs in public as well as private spaces. Indeed, mainstream nationalism could itself be a kind of disguise; Thapar-Bjorkert herself found many middle-class women whom she had taken to be Gandhian nationalists, but who were actually affiliated with the more radical underground groups:

> Raj Kumari Gupta initially told me that she worked for the Congress Party and was involved with non-violent activities such as spinning the charkha (spinning wheel) and propagating the Gandhian ideology. However, as the interview progressed and there was growing trust, she revealed that she had undertaken revolutionary work and was part of the team associated with the Kakori conspiracy case. [. . .] She and her associates would hide ammunition in their undergarments and wear khadi (spun cotton cloth and symbolic of Gandhi's nonviolent ideology) clothes to cover them. She said that 'our real work was violent but our garb was non-violence'.
>
> (43)

While Gupta says she only *pretended* to be Gandhian while actually being a revolutionary, women (and men) could in fact move between the revolutionary groups, the Congress Socialists, Subhas Chandra Bose's Forward Bloc, and the Communist Party – as much as between domestic and public spaces – as they searched for the best way to articulate their anti-imperialist nationalism.[15]

I have suggested that because women's political activities often blurred the borders between home and the world, whatever their political affiliations, they had to contend with Gandhi's simultaneous reconstruction and re-entrenchment of existing gender norms. As this book will detail, revolutionaries and communists also shared the common sense about politically active women and the ideal political subject that resulted from this contention. A large number of communists shared Gandhian attitudes to material possessions, even though they sprang from a different philosophy.[16] They were at pains to embrace lives of simplicity and hardship. In a country as poor as India, this is not hard to understand. But these attitudes could also harden into a suspicion of all pleasure, including sexual pleasure, and result in a moral puritanism. Thus, asceticism, as well as a revolutionary body capable of staunchly withstanding hardship and suffering, were ideals shared by communists and Gandhians alike. The details of these bodies could differ considerably, however: whereas Gandhi projected

a quasi-effeminate, emaciated physical self, many revolutionary groups trained their members to develop physically fit and militant bodies. Several followed Vivekananda's advice to young men: 'You will be nearer heaven through football than through the study of the Gita' (quoted in Laushey 3). Latter-day communists were inheritors of both traditions which, despite their divergences, could overlap when it came to the question of a renunciation of physical comforts and denial of pleasure. It is important to understand the extent to which communists shared this Gandhian ethos, as well as the extent to which even their own departures from the norm were still defined by it.

In some respects, this ethos dovetailed curiously with the image of women and sexuality within European Marxist movements, even though at first glance the image of a simple khadi sari-clad female revolutionary seems very different from that of a gun-toting, trouser-wearing Soviet fighter. But the two co-existed in a very peculiar fashion among the Indian left. One point of intersection was the idea, extolled in both traditions, of motherhood as a source of revolutionary understanding and action. Time and again, Indian revolutionaries drew parallels between the mother in Gorky's novel of that name and a local woman drawn into action by her position as mother. Moreover, many European revolutionaries also extolled the renunciation of personal comforts, including romance and even sexuality, in order to more efficiently serve the larger cause.

Abhilasha Kumari and Sabina Kidwai suggest that even as communist women challenged the class assumptions and biases of the Congress women, they imbibed some of their attitudes:

> The much-admired role models of the time were often women who contributed substantially to the national movement but never questioned conventional cultural roles; as a result, the euphoria and romance of the freedom struggle prevented the Communist women from radicalizing the struggle in their own interest.
>
> (144)

This view needs to be both extended and complicated. To be sure, communist women and men inherited, and inhabited, the powerful patriarchal division between private and public worlds that colonial rulers and upper-class, upper-caste nationalist men had collaboratively entrenched. However, as *Revolutionary Desires* will show, communist women also challenged this divide. *Their* romance of the freedom struggle also included visions quite radically different from those of the mainstream nationalist women. Inspired by such visions, they often explored, or at least imagined, alternative models of inhabiting personal relationships, the bonds of parenthood, conjugality, and friendship. By paying attention to these attempts and desires, however partial, unrealized, or even compromised they might have been, we can better understand the connections between radical and feminist histories in India.

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Given their deep imprint on the cultural and political landscape of the country, underground militant-nationalist groups in India had rather short lives. Their most

active phase lasted about a decade from the mid 1920s to the mid 1930s. These groups are an important element of the complex heritage of the Indian left, even though there have been consistent attempts to appropriate them into a liberal-nationalist or right-wing Hindu political tradition. Although the *political* connections between nationalist-revolutionaries and communists have been widely examined, the overlaps – and differences – between their attitudes to domesticity, renunciation, sexuality, and the family have received very little attention. Chapter 1, 'The romance of revolution,' and Chapter 2, 'Love in the time of revolution' examine women revolutionaries in Bengal and Punjab respectively. Both chapters place real-life women alongside literary representations, but they also differ methodologically in that the first chapter draws upon the lives, memoirs, and utterances of many revolutionary women, whereas the second one concentrates on the life of a single woman.

Most of the scholarship on women revolutionaries concentrates on Bengal, where women joined revolutionary groups in much larger numbers than elsewhere. Because the revolutionary tradition has been assimilated into mainstream nationalism, much of this writing has tended to be hagiographic. In recent years, though, feminist scholars have offered nuanced readings of revolutionary women's lives and have begun to estimate the psychological costs of underground life and of the ethos of heroic sacrifice that these women unevenly embraced. Here, I estimate the weight of their presence in a society where the very language of politics was highly gendered by juxtaposing the lives, and where possible the self-expression, of revolutionary women such as Kalpana Dutt, Pritilata Waddedar, Bina Das, and Kamala Das with two powerful and influential literary portrayals of them. One such portrayal is Sarat Chandra Chatterjee's proscribed novel *Pather Dabi* (The Right of Way), which was formative for many of the young revolutionaries in Bengal – for men as for women. Like Bankim's *Anandmath* and *Devi Chaudhurani*, it featured women as active revolutionaries, but it also marked a departure from these earlier novels, which were markedly Hindu in their vision of the nation. The romance of revolution created in *Pather Dabi* is, I argue, prescient about the gender dynamics of revolutionary organizations of the time. On the other hand, one of the most damning accounts of sexual politics within the revolutionary underground was Rabindranath Tagore's *Char Adhyay* (Four Chapters). I trace how it portrays romantic love as both transcending political affiliations and being compromised by them. In both novels, we see that even when male writers place women at the centre of their own discussions of revolutionary politics, they remain concerned primarily with male psychology and subjectivity. Together, these contrasting visions of radical life indicate how the gendered mores of different kinds of Indian nationalism both seeped into, and were contested by, the values and actions of revolutionary nationalists in Bengal.

Despite being proscribed by the British government, the confession of Bina Das, who shot at a British administrator at a Calcutta University function, circulated in Punjab and the United Provinces. This is not surprising, given that there were not only practical but also deep emotional connections and overlaps between revolutionaries in different locations, connections that have yet to be fully explored

because the scholarly tendency is to study each region in isolation from the other. Moreover, in contrast to revolutionary women in Bengal, their counterparts in Punjab have received very little attention. While the most important militant group, the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (HSRA), was explicitly left-leaning and therefore quite different from the Bengali underground, women occupied analogous places in each. The HSRA faced a major crisis when its leader, Chandrashekhar Azad, ordered that his comrade, Yashpal, be put to death for his relationship with 17-year-old Prakashvati Kapur. The comrades who agreed with this decision felt that there was no place for love affairs within the organization, but others did not entirely agree. As I show in Chapter 2, this incident, alongside attitudes to women and sexuality more generally, provided the vocabulary through which HSRA comrades expressed their differences with one another. They also reverberated in several Hindi memoirs and novels, including Yashpal's autobiography *Sinhavalokan* (A Lion's Eye View), his famous first novel *Dada Kamred* (Brother Comrade), the poet Harivansh Rai Bachchan's autobiography *Kya Bhooloon Kya Yaad Karoon* (What Should I Remember and What Forget), and, finally, Prakashvati's own memoir *Lahore Se Lucknow Tak* (From Lahore to Lucknow). I trace how the event and its afterlives shed light on contemporaneous debates about the proper place and attributes of political women. *Dada Kamred* is notably avant-garde, not only in explicitly taking on these issues, but also in weaving them into an argument that revolutionary change needs to extend beyond the sphere of economics and politics, into the arenas of gender and familial relations, sexuality, intimacy, and personal freedom.

Writing in the 1940s, Yashpal was convinced that the Communist Party was fostering new and open kinds of personal relations. Within the Soviet Union, Alexandra Kollontai's view that conjugal and familial relationships in a communist society needed to be overhauled had sparked off intense debates through the 1920s and 1930s. Her opinions often circulated in distorted form internationally, leading to suppositions in India that communists believed in free love. Tracing some of these debates, Chapter 3, entitled 'Commune-ism', explores how Indian communists explored alternative models of inhabiting personal relationships – parenthood, conjugality, and friendship – in communes that were set up all over the country when the Communist Party was legalized in 1942 during the Second World War. The Party was declared legal by the colonial authorities when it argued that a broad united front needed to be created in the war against fascism, a policy that I discuss in detail later. A word of clarification is in order here – although I discuss the militant national-revolutionaries first and the Communist Party later, it is not the case that the latter followed the former in temporal terms. There are divergent narratives about the founding of the Communist Party of India. According to the Communist Party of India (CPI), the organization was founded in Kanpur in 1925, and it grew out of the trade union movement.[17] But the CPI (Marxist) or CPM, which split from the CPI in 1964, maintains that the Party was formed five years earlier in Tashkent by a group that included M. N. Roy, who had earlier been involved with the revolutionary group Anushilan in Bengal, and who was also one of the founders of the Communist Party of Mexico. At least one person, Shaukat Usmani, was present at both Tashkent

and Kanpur, underlining the fact that there were no clear-cut divisions between these groups. Colonial authorities were terrified that Marxism would take hold among Indian nationalists, and often suspected connections between revolutionaries and the communists even when there were none. They had proscribed Marxist literature, which used to be smuggled into the country, sometimes by British communists who established underground connections with their counterparts in India.[18] Communists were arrested and tried under various 'conspiracy cases' which paradoxically had the effect of making them, and communist beliefs in general, more visible to the Indian populace at large. Some of this history will become evident in later chapters of this book, but for now I only want to point out that, for many years of its existence, the Communist Party, like the revolutionary groups, had to operate underground.

In the underground phase, but especially once the Party was legalized, there were formal and de facto communes in which men and women lived together in ways that departed radically from the values of the conservative families from which most of them came. In particular, I consider the Bombay Commune, drawing upon its descriptions in Communist autobiographies and memoirs, including those of Shaukat Azmi, Usha Verma, A. S. R. Chari, and Victor Kiernan, and in interviews given to me by several women activists. I examine the different ways in which the communists visualized marriage and coupledom and reconfigured – as well as replicated – existing mores of the family. The chapter ends with a discussion of Yashpal's remarkable Hindi novel *Manushya Ke Roop* (Forms of Humankind), the only literary work I have come across which discusses the commune in some detail. The boundaries between the personal and the political were redrawn in the communes of course, but they were also interrogated within communist families outside the commune. Sometimes the refashioning of private and political spaces was heady and liberating for women; at other times, it could result in despair and misery because it placed particular burdens upon them, as I discuss throughout this book.

A path-breaking attempt to chart such refashioning and reckon its costs is a book I mentioned earlier, *We Were Making History,* for which Stree Shakti Sanghatana, a feminist collective, interviewed women who had participated in the Telangana uprisings in Andhra in 1947. The interviews recorded both their nostalgia for 'that magic time' when they perceived themselves to be central to the armed struggles and their ideal of remaking the social order, as well as their deep resentment that, after the movement was called off, they were caused to retreat into the very roles that the movement had allowed them to transgress.[19] The women express their differences with and even anger towards their families and the Party, but also note the ways in which the latter facilitated their charting of new paths and lives. Janaki Nair rightly points out that the Telangana struggle was not a feminist movement, and that it is the 'post hoc feminist interrogation' that 'produced a feminist recollection of that magic time, a reconstruction of the movement understood through the lens of gender' (62). She also notes that a later volume, Parvathi Menon's *Breaking Barriers*, re-appropriates these Telangana memories, as for instance when it places a new interview with one of the women featured in *We Were Making History* alongside interviews with present-day women leaders of the Communist Party of India (Marxist).[20] Predictably, Nair

notes, the new interview has 'none of the humour, the critical edge, or the reflexivity of the earlier testimony', and instead the radical 'voices [of the Telangana fighters] are subordinated to the imperatives of writing a heroic account of their achievements' (63).

This sanctioned solemnity of tone is partially shared by older books such as Renu Chakravartty's *Communists in the Indian Women's Movement*, published in 1980, which did, however, break new ground by documenting the work of women within the Communist Party. Whereas *We Were Making History* is a feminist analysis of a communist uprising and highlights tensions between women and the Party, *Communists in the Indian Women's Movement* tries to show how in India the emancipation of women and the communist movement are historically, even necessarily, connected. As the title makes clear, Chakravartty lays claim on the women's movement on behalf of communists. As early reviews by communist women attest, this was an unusual move for the time. One such reviewer found Chakravartty's title

> bewildering. [. . .] An Indian Women's movement? Has there been one? Or does the author perhaps mean women in the Indian Communist movement? The confusion arises because she uses a term, 'women's movement', which has certain specific implications in the Western context. [. . .] However, her pioneering effort in collecting a vast body of informative material which has never been put together before, indirectly makes us see that the term might be used with a somewhat different connotation in the Indian context.
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> (Bhattacharya 20)

For another reviewer, the book was significant because it calls attention to a 'new feature' of contemporary women's movements; that is, 'the demand for "autonomous" women's organizations being made by bourgeois "women's rights" groups and many social scientists' (Velayudhan 60). The implication is that were it not for these claims, there would be no need to connect communist and women's movements.

Although Chakravartty downplays the tensions between female cadres and male leaders, or between women on the question of gender roles within the Party, her book does make several important claims about the foundational role played by communist women both in organizing women-only actions of different kinds, and in extending the reach of women's groups and organizations to poorer women, peasant women, and working-class women. Despite her repetition of Party rhetoric about how women fought 'side by side with men' in various important movements, she traces a parallel history of communist women's organizing against hunger, against bondage and sexual slavery (she calls them 'feudal laws and customs'), and against colonialism (*Communists* 216, Chapter 13 *passim*). Missing from *Communists in the Indian Women's Movement*, however, are precisely the nuances that *We Were Making History* tried to locate – that is, a reckoning of radical thought and action not just in the public sphere, but also within the confines of existing forms of domesticity.

Not far from the Bombay Commune was a world that was both connected to and far removed from it: Girangaon, or the textile mill district in Bombay. Here, a very different kind of female revolutionary was being honed. Chakravartty acknowledges (as do later labour and feminist historians), the remarkable work of Ushabai Dange and Parvatibai Bhore, two leaders of the mill workers in Bombay. Both women wrote their memoirs (in Marathi), each of which lays bare the personal costs of their political lives. In Chapter 4, 'The political is personal', I discuss both books – Ushabai Dange's *Pan Aikta Kaun* (Who Listens to Me) and Parvatibai Bhore *Eka Ranaraginichi Hakikat* (The Reality of One Fighter's Life). Ushabai, who married the controversial CPI leader S. A. Dange, narrates her dramatic journey from child widow to a leader of workers, dwelling on her marriage, political consciousness, motherhood, and her worldly desires and fears. The title of the book is also its recurring refrain: 'Who listens to me?' Ushabai is bitterly frank about the costs of her life with Dange, her constantly thwarted craving for greater companionship and her feelings of being abandoned by him at key moments of her life. The larger collectivity of women workers husbanded her, she writes, but that only highlighted the lack of a husband. Ushabai was clear that her marriage and coupledom did not replicate outdated bourgeois norms, but rather followed from radical action on her part and Dange's. This meant that she also believed communes were not the way to reform the family, and that they were essentially the experiments of elite women and men.

If Ushabai Dange's book illustrates the dictum that the personal is inescapably political, Parvatibai Bhore's memoir illuminates the corollary – that political consciousness is rooted in the most deeply personal part of one's being. Bhore was the only woman union leader of the Bombay textile mills who came from the working class herself. This virtually unknown book is also the most eloquent account of both domestic servitude and the freedom offered by political participation. Parvatibai's fight against her patriarchal family propelled and shaped her desperate desire to become part of a larger collectivity – not of women, but of the working class fighting against imperial rule and capitalist domination. Conversely, her political work gave her the vocabulary to understand how domestic servitude was naturalized in the family. Both Ushabai and Parvatibai also narrate how they felt browbeaten, harassed, or marginalized by upper-class Party members. Their memoirs, like some of the other stories included in other chapters, show that despite talk of declassing, and despite the inter-class mingling that took place in communes, class continued to both structure Party hierarchy and deeply fracture female solidarities.

Although the significant contributions of communist activists have not been accorded appropriate space in accounts of Indian feminism, in recent years Marxist and communist writers have come to occupy a pride of place there. Literary-critical scholarship has shown how radical writers like Rasheed Jehan and Ismat Chugtai (along with their male counterparts in the Progressive Writers' Association) contested conventional notions of both freedom and gender relations.[21] Rasheed Jehan was a doctor and a member of the Communist Party, and her fiction was banned by the colonial government. Ismat Chugtai admired Jehan and looked up to her as a model, but she was not a formal member of the Party. She too had to defend herself

from charges of obscenity in newly decolonized India. Both women combined an attention to class differences between women with an analysis of how women of all classes could be shackled by the conventions of marriage and domesticity. A sophisticated study of these women, and of the Progressive Writers in general, argues that we need to recognize the *distance* between such writers and the Communist Party. Priyamvada Gopal quotes approvingly David Roediger's observation: 'A fixation on the Party, in both memoirs of members and ex-members and in the work of historians, has left enormous gaps in our knowledge of the radical past' (Gopal 18). One can also argue, however, that a fixation with measuring radicalism only in direct proportion to individual differences from Party policies will have the same effect of obscuring the protean and often unexpected lineages of radical thought and practice.[22] Moreover, when it comes to the analysis of Indian writing and gender, there has been a neglect of, rather than a fixation upon, communists, partly because of their declining political fortunes in recent years and partly because they are associated with sorry narratives of political compromise as well as an unimaginative, and at times outright hostile, approach to questions of feminist agency and sexuality.[23] While it is important to recover the history of one strain of radicalism – that of non-Party Marxists – it is equally important to not oversimplify the political commitment or subjectivities of those who stayed within the Party fold. Party affiliations do not necessarily guarantee radical commitment, nor do they automatically denote radicalism compromised. Nor can Party affiliation be a self-evident measure of or limitation upon literary or artistic merit.

A case in point is the artist Chittaprosad, whose arresting prints of the starvation and devastation that accompanied the Bengal Famine of 1943 were reproduced in the Communist Party newspaper, *People's War*. Long neglected by the art establishment precisely because of his communist ties, Chittaprosad's recent 'rediscovery' and celebration as a major Indian artist is accompanied by claims that he 'eschewed a purely doctrinaire pictorial language in favour of a broad humanist agenda' (Mallick 13). But Chittaprosad's political commitment defined the meaning and contours of his humanism (127). Moreover, there *was* no 'doctrinaire pictorial language' among Indian Marxists of the time and Chittaprosad honed his own vocabulary by meshing his close observations of ordinary people with folk and local art forms, as much as with prevailing forms of communist art being practised in the West. Analogously, Bijon Bhattacharya, who wrote an enormously successful play *Nabanna* (New Harvest) that depicted the huge social trauma of the Bengal Famine, tended to present a romantic picture of ordinary villagers, but his folksy romanticism was shaped by his deep familiarity with the music and lore of bauls, fakirs, boatmen, and rural artisans, rather than by any Marxist doctrine about the natural virtues of the rural masses (Bharucha 46–47).

The famine was a catalyst for new forms of art and performance as well as for the formation of a new kind of women's political organization. Famine relief efforts propelled communist women to set up the Mahila Atma Raksha Samiti (MARS). MARS moved beyond the ambit of existing nationalist women's organizations and simultaneously pushed the Communist Party to engage with women's political

activities. Famine relief efforts also cemented the formation and spread of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) and the Communist Party's Central Cultural Squad as well as local cultural squads. Activists and artists graphically detailed the suffering caused by the famine and, in the process, shaped new forms of art, cultural performance, and political outreach. As they did so, they travelled to different parts of the country, forging new political and artistic ties among themselves as well as their viewers. For women activists, singers, and actresses, these efforts allowed novel experiences – performing before enormous audiences; travelling to different parts of the country; training, rehearsing, and living with each other and male comrades; and becoming part of experimental artistic endeavours that, for all their shortcomings, remain important landmarks in the history of public and political performance in India.

In Chapter 5, 'The dance of hunger', I bring together these different forms of communist activism in order to show how they expressed and reshaped ideologies of gender within the communist movement. I draw upon a wide range of sources including Party newspaper reports and pamphlets; the memoirs of Manikuntala Sen (one of the most important MARS organizers in Bengal) and those of Usha Dutta Verma (a Communist Party activist who was also a dancer and an actress); and the writings and cultural productions of communists – Chittaprosad's art, Sunil Janah's photographs, Bijon Bhattacharya's Bengali play *Nabanna* (New Rice), Krishan Chandar's Urdu novella *Anna Data* (The Giver of Grain), K. A. Abbas's Hindustani film *Dharti Ke Lal* (Children of the Earth) and Sulekha Sanyal's Bengali novel, *Nabankur* (The Seedling). Sanyal's novel is at a remove from the other artistic expressions in more ways than one. It was published in 1956, more than a decade after the height of the famine. Its perspective is not just temporally distant from those events, but temperamentally too. It is a female *bildungsroman*, and in charting the political and emotional growth of its protagonist, it foregrounds her battles within the fold of the family, decentring (but not devaluing) political action in the world beyond. In this respect it both recalls women's writings of an earlier period and anticipates the tone and temper of feminist fictions of the 1960s and 1970s, which often concentrate on the interiority of women.

I concentrate on Sanyal's novel for its unique qualities, but there were other communist women who wrote about the famine as well as about the communist-led peasant movements that were unleashed across the country, which I do not explore in this book. The most notable communist movements were the Tebhaga uprising in West Bengal, which involved some of the MARS activists, the Warli movement of 1945–1947 in Maharashtra, and the Telangana revolt of 1947–1948 in Andhra. All these movements are important for a feminist, and not just a communist, history of India, as recent scholarship has begun to acknowledge. Some of them have generated first-person narratives, such as Godavari Parulekar's *Adivasis Revolt*, an account of her work among the tribal peoples of Warli in Maharashtra. Parulekar offers a graphic account of the ways in which class and sexual oppression are intimately interwoven, even though the Party to which she belonged did not learn from the experience of its own activists in the field, and continued to speak in formulaic ways about the nature

of women's oppression in India.[24] Parulekar's book remains under-examined by feminists, perhaps because, like Manikuntala Sen, she decentres herself as she charts her journey from a middle-class urban activist to an organizer of some of the poorest and most deprived sections of the Indian population.

In Chapter 6, entitled 'The family romance', I consider the accounts of four women who, like Godavari Parulekar and Manikuntala Sen, were whole-timers, devoting their lives entirely to Party activities. They were also married to other whole-timers. Their narratives nonetheless illustrate the domestic aspects of their lives and show how they tried to inhabit coupledom and family life differently, according to what they understood to be the communist ideal. Three of these accounts also describe the erosion of such idealism, as well as changes in communist culture from the 1940s to the 1960s and after.

Perhaps the most unusual is Vimla Dang's *Fragments of an Autobiography*, which was written in English in 1957, one year after the publication of Sanyal's *Nabankur*. It remained unfinished and was not intended for publication. Vimla Dang and her husband Satyapal were prominent activists and Party leaders in Punjab, but Vimla's memoir concentrates entirely on her courtship with Satyapal, recording intimate details almost like a diary does, and decentring political events. The book conveys the power of the ideal of communist coupledom, but as in the stories of Ushabai Dange and Parvatibai Bhore, we also detect the shadow of factional quarrels which beset the organization, and were ultimately to split it in 1964. The second story is that of Murtazai Shakeel, a relatively unknown trade union worker who moved from Hyderabad to Delhi in the 1950s, and it is based on my interviews with her. Murtazai's brother, the famous Urdu poet Niaz Haider, inspired her break from her conventional Muslim upbringing, and shaped the terms of her subsequent engagement with the Party, her trade union activities, and her marriage with another Party comrade in Delhi. Although she remained, in her own telling, 'the unknown comrade who brought in tea and chairs', she offers a sensitive account of the problems of being a whole-timer, and of the class differences within the organization. The third narrative is that of Usha Dutta Verma. Her Bengali-language memoir *Dinguli More* (My Days), which I also draw upon in Chapters 3 and 5, describes how she lived in a commune in Calcutta and performed with the Communist Party's squad and IPTA during the famine in Bengal (Verma). But the memoir, which was published in 1993, is also unusually frank in detailing how she bore the economic and emotional burden of the family, and how difficult it was to sustain a dignified existence when both husband and wife were professional revolutionaries.

This difficulty was multiplied many times over in the case of Kondapalli Koteswaramma – an activist in the Telangana uprising and the wife of Kondapalli Sitaramayya, a prominent Party member involved in founding a militant Maoist organization known as the People's War Group (PWG) in 1969. In 2012, at the age of 92, Koteswaramma published an autobiography in Telugu that recounts her life as a child widow, her marriage, her Telangana days, and life in the underground, but also the series of personal tragedies that befell her after her husband abandoned both her and the Party. Koteswaramma had been interviewed as part of the book *We Were*

Making History, and she had then offered an incisive critique of the Party's approach to women and its understanding of gender relations. But what is unusual, and unusually moving, about *Nirjana Vaaradhi* (The Bridge Abandoned, published in English as *The Sharp Knife of Memory*) is that such a critique of the Party as well as her husband is expressed by narrating how *she* inhabited and experienced particular events. While she is unflinching in expressing her pain and disappointment with both the organization and her husband, she is also steadfast in her commitment to communist ideals of a free and egalitarian society, ideals that allow her to navigate the tragedies that befall her. Taken together, these four stories reveal both the abiding power and the failure of the ideal of the 'communist family' as an alternative kinship structure capable of critiquing and transcending conservative social structures in India.

The last chapter, 'Becoming Indian', enters a different and larger territory through the story of Sheila Didi, a communist trade unionist, lawyer, and feminist activist in Punjab. Sheila grew up in Kenya in a deeply nationalist family, committed to the cause of Indian independence, but both her family and she were also equally committed to the cause of racial equality and freedom in Kenya. She went to Britain to study law and decided to move to India only as an adult. As she narrated the trajectory of her early life and radicalization to me, it opened up an entire history of working-class immigration and Indian Marxism in Kenya that is virtually unknown today. Of course, international connections were always crucial to the revolutionary and communist movement in India. Many of the earliest activists went abroad both to escape persecution and to gather support from revolutionaries elsewhere. Indian communists travelled to Britain, Europe, the United States and Latin America, as well as other parts of Asia, from the first decades of the twentieth century onwards. Their conversations with Lenin, Stalin, and other members of the Communist International are well known. Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, many well-known Indian communists studied at British universities, often with famous Marxist intellectuals such as Eric Hobsbawm. But Sheila's life and political growth speaks of a very different, non-elite internationalism, more in the tradition of Ghadar, the most long-lived of the early militant anti-colonial movements, which originated in the United States and had a presence in five continents (see Appendix 2). Given the hyper-nationalism and racism of contemporary India, Sheila's story opens up a salutary story of Indian-African solidarities and conversations. What makes it particularly pertinent for the argument of this book, though, is that it also graphically illustrates the simultaneity of political and personal consciousness and decisions.

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As will be evident by now, the seven chapters in this book range across many different periods and places; two of them (Chapters 2 and 7) concentrate on the life of a single individual while the others bring together the experiences and reflections of many women. Most juxtapose memoirs and recollections with novels and other creative work, but not all of them do. This methodological promiscuity is warranted by the multifaceted and often elusive nature of what I am trying to capture: the deeply

personal yet always public relationships between women and the radical movements they inhabited.

I do not intend to argue here for the validity or importance of fiction, memoirs and autobiographies to history, and especially to women's history, since there is such a substantial body of scholarship on this question. Precisely because the 'official' histories of nations, movements, and organizations are so particular, as well as partial, it is not only admissible but necessary to include materials that do more than 'fill in the gaps' – they reconfigure the very terms of the inquiry. In an important book on the way Hindi novels attend to the question of revolutionary desire, Nikhil Govind argues that 'It is in literature, rather than in the realm of the overtly political event [. . .] that arguably the most creative, expansive and systematical detailing of the political took place' and that it was the novel that housed the most subtle and detailed reflections on the nature of political subjectivity (4). As my second chapter shows, such reflections were often made possible by particular conversations and crises within political movements, so that the relationship between politics and literature is deeply, though not mechanically, symbiotic.

I do, however, want to comment briefly on the question of autobiographical form and narrative choices. David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn have suggested that although life-histories have a long and varied history in India, in Western scholarship on South Asia the study of individual lives is rare because 'a paradigm of "collectivity"' has tended to prevail whereby 'a few privileged individuals might be sufficiently exceptional – or Westernized – to be deemed worthy subjects for conventional biographies by historians and political scientists; or, like Gandhi, Nehru, and Nirad Chaudhuri, be able to compose their own self-narratives' (2). In such scholarship, 'It was confidently assumed that articulate individuality was a hallmark of the West', but even when such assumptions have been shed, 'historians of India have generally been inclined to consider life-histories as *sources*, of varying degrees of utility and trustworthiness; they have seldom paused to consider them as *genres* worthy of systematic analysis' (3–4). This is not exactly true, because feminist critics (historians as well as literary scholars) *have* thought deeply about modes of representation in various types of life-stories in India, and attended to the silences in such stories as much as what is actually narrated. Some decades ago, for example, Susie Tharu and K. Lalita noted how *many* women wrote autobiographies in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and suggested that generic conventions, as much as content, structure these autobiographies and personal accounts (160–61). Since then, feminists have amplified how narrative form refracts 'facts' in women's personal accounts, written as well as oral.[25]

As I worked on this project, I was surprised by the number of communist women who wrote memoirs or revisited their lives in extended interviews. It seems to me that many of them are drawing upon these older traditions and forms of women's autobiography in India. For example, Ushabai Dange's *Pan Aikta Kaun* shares much formally and tonally with Ramabai Ranade's 1910 autobiography *Ayushyakil Kahi Athwani* (Memories of Our Life Together), which dwells on Ramabai's life with the reformist jurist Mahadev Govind Ranade. It may have

been the long history of women's autobiographies in Marathi, penned by a variety of women – wives of reformers, politically active women, and actresses – that facilitated the life-stories of Ushabai as well as Parvatibhai Bhore. There is an equally long tradition of women's autobiographies in Bengali which may have shaped Manikuntala Sen's autobiography *Shediner Kotha*. But at the same time *Shediner Kotha* more evidently shares certain features of communist autobiographies that were produced in the West or by Indian male communists than does Ushabai Dange's book.

In an essay on South African communist Pauline Podbrey's autobiography *White Girl in Search of the Party*, Steven Robins argues that a particular tradition of autobiographical writing – one he calls the 'Great White Man' tradition – informs Podbrey's book. For the book is silent about questions of her Jewishness, about her relationship with her Indian husband, and about the gendered biases of her own upbringing (Robins). What Robins calls the 'Great White Man' tradition clearly shares some key features with what Jo Stanley identifies as communist autobiography – most notably, a bracketing of the personal from one's public life, a form that I have discussed earlier in this introduction. The memoirs I include in this book show, however, that not all Indian communist women wrote in that idiom. Those who did not think of themselves as important leaders, at least at the time they were writing, were more expressive about their personal lives and emotions than those who were important members of the Party from a fairly young age. According to Robins, Podbrey felt freer to talk about issues she deliberately left out in her book, and even to criticize her writing self. I did not feel that the interviews I conducted or read were necessarily a medium that allowed for greater freedom and openness of expression, although I have to admit that none of the women I interviewed had also written a memoir. But I found a variety of speaking voices and tones in the interviews I did conduct. Some women chose to speak exactly as they might write – thus, when I interviewed Sarla Sharma, one of the earliest Communist activists in Delhi, she referred me to her interview recorded as part of the Oral History Project at the Nehru Memorial Library where she makes almost no reference to the everyday experience of politics, or to questions of marriage, mothering, and domesticity, let alone sexuality. Although I spoke for hours with her, and we had shared a personal relationship that allowed her to be affectionate and intimate with me, there was nothing she told me that departed substantially from what she had recorded many years earlier in a formal interview. Others, such as Murtazai Shakeel and Sheila Didi were far less formulaic, choosing to concentrate on a particular aspect or period of their lives and to talk about personal details as well as political activities.

Each of these ways of narrating is expressive and informative in its own way. When someone tells their own story, she is making narrative choices, which is to say, she selects what she wants to talk about and decides how to explain her choices. Each of us is familiar with particular forms of storytelling, which we draw upon in crucial and revealing ways, as we craft our own stories – as we decide what to keep in the story, what to leave out, what images to use, and how to string together these different elements. In that sense, as Alessandro Portelli remarks about oral history, there are no

'false' autobiographical stories, for all stories tell us something about how the subject experienced and chose to tell the truth ('Peculiarities' 100).

For this reason, as I recount the stories and histories of various women, I have chosen not to comment extensively on the question of unreliability and partiality of memory. For all these stories are also important for a reason other than what they reveal about what 'really' happened or didn't happen. When I started writing this book, I mentioned the names of some of the women I wanted to interview to a friend who was writing a book on left histories himself. He laughed, and commented, 'oh, but are they not all irrelevant today?' In a sense, of course they are. Their shortcomings, contradictions and disappointments underline a failure on the part of the organized left. The search for a world 'in which all will be equal . . . [and] first of all men and women will be equal' (as Parvati tells Pramila in the novel *Beef*) is harder than ever in today's political climate, both in India and in large parts of the world (Rai 262). But to animate their stories is, in a sense, to reanimate the spirit of their quest, and to learn from its highs and its lows. Our research, as Portelli poignantly reminds us,

> may help us cope with some of our most pressing contemporary needs: the redefinition of 'self' and the crisis of political action. [. . .] At a time in our common history when the crisis of radical and revolutionary movements has left most of us alone to face our individual and common problems, the quest for self-definition often takes the form of narcissism, cynicism, downright selfishness, and disregard for general issues. I believe that one possible function of research today is to, once again, place the question of identity on a social and interpersonal plane, and to help us recognize ourselves in what makes us similar yet different from others.
>
> (*Death* 43)

Revolutionary Desires is written in a similar belief – one that was, I think, shared by the women whose lives this book follows.

Notes

1 Translation mine. Thanks to Francesca Orsini for leading me to this novel.
2 See, for example, Forbes; and Kumar. Thanks to Francesca Orsini for leading me to this novel.
3 Most of the women I discuss stayed with the CPI. Some joined the Communist Party of India (Marxist), abbreviated as CPI (Marxist) or CPM, which over the years became much larger than the CPI.
4 One example is *Memoirs: 25 Communist Freedom Fighters*, which was published on the occasion of the 18th Congress of the CPM. Only three of the 25 people included are women. See also Parvathi Menon; Munsi.
5 See also Kannabiran and Lalitha.
6 For brief summaries of these movements see Saldanha; Kannabiran; Mallarika Roy; Srila Roy; Panjabi, 'Testimony'; Panjabi, *Unclaimed Harvest*.
7 On growing up in a communist family in the British context, see Samuel.

8 On musical performance in the history of IPTA, see Damodaran.
9 For more on this line of thinking, see Viswesaran.
10 Tanika Sarkar has rightly pointed out that scholarship which takes liberal-nationalism as the prime site for the creation of an indigenous patriarchy, one that is born in response to Western ideology, vests 'its opponents – the revivalists and the orthodoxy [. . .] with a rebellious, even emancipatory agenda, since they prevented colonization of domestic ideology' (*Hindu Wife* 193).
11 For more on such challenges, see Bannerji.
12 See, for example, Kishwar.
13 As Tanika Sarkar reminds us, 'the enlarged space for women in the movement was not so much the result of his [Gandhi's] own expanding vision, as it was of women themselves creating their own spaces' ('Political Women' 551). Gandhi's pronouncements on women did not always circumscribe the activities of his female followers. Sarojini Naidu, for example, defied his ban on women joining him on the Dandi March.
14 Janaki Nair remarks that it 'values the separate worlds of women without questioning the field of power itself' (61).
15 For an excellent discussion of such overlaps and differences see Seth. The 'history sheet' of Satyavati Devi, prepared by the colonial authorities, makes fascinating reading in this regard as it charts her movement across different anti-imperialist groups and individuals. In the early days of her political activity alone, she associated with the Chittagong and Lahore revolutionaries, and with M. N. Roy, and was imprisoned for taking part in the Civil Disobedience movement of 1931. She also worked with a variety of labour organizers, and under her guidance, the 'Delhi Congress Socialist Party, in conjunction with the Meerut Congress Socialist Party began forming up a new party on the lines of the HSRA'. See Chaudhuri.
16 Rajarshi Dasgupta also notes this point.
17 The All India Trade Union Congress or AITUC had been formed in 1920. For the CPI's official account of its founding, see 'Brief History of CPI'.
18 On these connections, see Carritt.
19 Lakshmi Sahgal reports a similar fate for the members of the Rani Jhansi Regiment, or the women's wing of Subhash Chandra Bose's Indian National Army (135).
20 In recent years, the CPM has been involved in making available life-histories of some its important leaders, but these are told from a very particular standpoint.
21 See Gopal; Pradhan.
22 As Himani Bannerji notes, 'in a curious reversal of meaning, Marxism has come to signify conservatism while reform and radicalism are seen as the attributes of non-or anti-Marxism. Only those social movements are considered 'new' or 'subaltern' which do without, or even repudiate, class politics' (903).
23 See, for example, Ilina Sen, 'Feminists'. Sen's article reviews some of the issues in the light of the remarks on feminism made by a major figure in the CPM. For a more recent scenario, see Devika and Kodoth.
24 For one feminist assessment, see Saldanha. This article does not, however, engage with what Parulekar's account tells us about her own subjectivity.
25 See, for example, Panjabi, 'Testimony'; Sarkar, *Hindu Wife* (95–134); Kidwai (315–82).

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1

THE ROMANCE OF REVOLUTION

On 11 February 1932, a British intelligence report noted that 'girl students' are among the 'most generous potential assassins possessing a desire for 'martyrdom' akin to the early Christians'.[1] The report was probably responding to an event that took place five days earlier – Bina Das, a student aged 21, had shot Bengal Governor Sir Stanley Jackson at the Convocation of Calcutta University. Three months later, the Rajshahi District Magistrate O. M. Martin described women terrorists as 'more deadly than men'. What made women revolutionaries more 'deadly' than their male counterparts was neither their numbers, nor the nature of their actions, but rather, the shock and surprise of their participation in the militant underground movement for the independence of India from British rule. Women had not been welcomed by the underground groups in Bengal, Punjab, or the United Provinces, the three areas where such groups were most active. The fact that young women were now being allowed to join, often because they had already acted on their own initiative, required both Indian and British men (not to mention other women) to rethink their very conceptions of Indian femininity.

Feminist scholarship has tended to query the deeds, subjectivities, and political impact of revolutionary women according to a somewhat rigid set of terms: seeking to analyse the deeds, subjectivities, and political impact of revolutionary women; should they be considered 'goddesses' or 'rebels'? What effects did the presence and actions of these women have on the revolutionary underground? How did they conform strategically to existing gender ideologies in order to carve out spaces for their own participation in subversive activities? Did they open up a far more radically proto-feminist space within the nationalist movement? These are particularly pressing questions because, as historian Durba Ghosh has suggested, 'even when women were not particularly well-behaved, the practice of history-writing – as it has been generated by particular bourgeois norms and professional demands – produced Indian women as middle-class ideals of womanhood' (358). More than a generation

ago, Geraldine Forbes had pointed out that such an appropriation had occurred in the revolutionaries' lifetimes:

> Because they operated in a political sphere where women who were dedicated to the nationalist movement could take part in activities which would have otherwise been closed to them, the extent to which they were social rebels was obfuscated. What was emphasized was their sacrifice. To Bengalis they were the brave girls who defied the British, who were so devoted to the ideal of political freedom, that they would sacrifice not only material comfort and family, but even their own lives.
>
> ('Goddesses or Rebels?' 12)

Such a view was, to some extent, shared by the revolutionary women themselves, and Ghosh suggests that their own pronouncements set the tone for later 'histories of revolutionary women terrorists [that] take the form of reinstating the "ideals of Indian womanhood'"(321). But the question lingers: were they simply re-instating established ideals, or simultaneously redefining them? As Forbes observes: 'no one, including the revolutionary women themselves, considered revolutionaries representative of Indian womanhood' (*Women in Modern India* 155). Revolutionary women, she notes, dramatically enlarged the scope of female political activities: they spent days and nights in underground hideouts with men, learned to shoot and used guns, made and hurled bombs, disguised themselves as men, resisted torture in prison, committed suicide in order to evade arrest, recruited and trained other young women, financed the movement, wrote in and ran journals, and – this is of particular interest here – a majority of them remained unmarried, at least while they were active in the movement.

The most interesting question that arises from their histories is not whether these revolutionaries were 'bad' or 'good' women, rebels or goddesses. To frame the questions using such binaries is to occlude the fact that the meanings of these terms were then in flux, in part *because* of the activities of such women. It was through their revolutionary actions that conceptions of what was feasible and socially acceptable for Indian women were transformed. Moreover, revolutionary women were not a homogeneous group with a single approach to either nationalism or femininity, and their lives and writings necessarily open up the range of their negotiations with dominant assumptions about ideal femininity.

Hagiographic accounts of revolutionary women often fail to elaborate the differences between the demands made of them by the revolutionary nationalist underground and by mainstream nationalists. Within the larger national context, it is true that nationalists of different stripes shared certain attitudes towards female political participation, and about the subjectivity, affective lives, and sexuality of women. But their points of divergence, as well as their shared attitudes, are both crucial to understanding revolutionary women – not just in Bengal, but also in Punjab (to which I turn in the next chapter) – and to situating them in relation to women active in the Communist Party of India in later decades. While many revolutionary

women did join the CPI and other left-wing groups, my aim is not to detect and trace the seeds of Marxist ideology in their early actions. Rather, I want to ask: how do the histories and representations of these women enable us to understand the powerful and abiding construction of revolutionary desire in India?

In many literary texts and historical archives, revolutionary women's passion is consistently expressed as a desire for the nation and for freedom, accompanied by a need to make this desire heard. Their personal attachments are always represented as subsumed within and indeed legitimated by this nationalist passion. This sort of identification with a higher political ideal was often generated at the explicit behest of their revolutionary organizations, which were wary of admitting women in the first place. Women's sexuality was understood as a potential threat to the brotherhood of revolutionary men, and the onus was on women to set aside their personal desires in the service of the larger cause. At other times, such nationalist identification followed from the fact that these women shared the prevailing ethos about political commitments being more important than any personal desire.

However, strikingly, this model of women prioritizing the larger cause is decidedly *not* the case in two influential novels of the time – Sarat Chandra Chatterjee's *Pather Dabi* (The Right of Way) and Rabindranath Tagore's *Char Adhyay* (Four Chapters). The publication of these novels framed the years of most intense and widespread female participation in the revolutionary underground. *Pather Dabi* appeared in 1926, just before this period, and its portrayal of male and female activists was formative for many of the young revolutionaries in Bengal. Like Bankim's *Anandmath* and *Devi Chaudhurani* before it, it featured women as active revolutionaries, but it also marked a departure from those earlier novels which are set in historically distant times, do not engage directly with contemporary political debates, and are markedly Hindu in their vision of the nation. *Char Adhyay* was published after this period, in 1934, and offered a damning account of the militant underground precisely in its depiction of a woman revolutionary and her lover. Although formally very different, both novels portray militant nationalism in highly gendered and sexually charged vocabularies. Together, as I will suggest, they illustrate some of the ways in which nationalist passions and individual libidinal desire were framed as both antithetical and inseparable.

These issues are complicated by the fact that, as recent scholarship has argued, we cannot rely on conventionally constituted archives when it comes to unearthing revolutionary histories. As Kama Maclean writes, 'Given the necessary secrecy of revolutionary organisation and the flaws in the written record [. . .] if we were to rely solely on written archives, we would have little chance of retrieving revolutionary histories' (680). Against the assumption that memoirs and oral histories are too fanciful and unreliable, Maclean demonstrates why they are central to any history of Indian revolutionaries. Fiction, I want to suggest, is equally important, although Tanika Sarkar, who fruitfully pairs *Pather Dabi* and *Char Adhyay*, wonders if it is 'presumptuous to comment on the works of two literary giants of modern Bengal for the purposes of a narrow field of historical research' ('Nationalism' 449).[2] If Maclean is arguing against the view that certain non-traditional sources *fall short*

of counting as historical evidence, Sarkar's demurral constitutes literature as *too capacious* and complex for the same purpose. However, if, as feminist and other radical scholarship has argued over the last many decades, literature and history are mutually constitutive modes of representation, then what matters is not the nature of materials but rather our reading practices. Especially as we try to imagine the lived experiences that constitute history, we will need to promiscuously juxtapose literary representations, memoirs, interviews, and anecdotes with orthodox archival materials. This is my approach in the sections that follow, which focus first on *Pather Dabi*, then on the women revolutionaries, and finally on *Char Adhyay*.

*

In a memoir published in 1947, the year in which India became independent, Bina Das recalled that one of the formative incidents in her youth was

> acquiring Sarat Chandra Chatterjee's *Pather Dabi*. I was preparing for the matriculation examination. Learning that the book was banned, I felt a great compulsion to read it. I read it over and over and almost had it by heart. In school too the book was the most important topic for discussion.
>
> One night I saw father reading the book till three o'clock at night. Next morning he commented, 'A woman's common-sense approach is always better. Bharati's opinion is better than the Doctor's.' I argued with father on this point, and then went to school and continued the opposite stance with my friends.
>
> (8)[3]

Bina wrote a long essay on the novel, much to the consternation of her headmistress. The school authorities were compelled to disallow the essay as part of Bina's examination because in 1927, a year after it first appeared, *Pather Dabi* had been proscribed, alongside 'Bolshevik literature' that continued to 'invade the country'.[4] Although the essay was ultimately allowed to stand, Bina received lower marks for it than one she had written for another test; the headmistress was sure that it was because of the nature of the book she had chosen to write on.[5]

Pather Dabi was influential for many of the young revolutionaries in Bengal – for men as well as women.[6] Kamala Dasgupta, who later gave Bina the revolver she used to shoot Jackson, first read it when she was depressed because Gandhi had not allowed her to join his ashram without her parents' permission. As it turned out, the novel's world of heroism and romance directed Kamala's political energies towards the militant organization Jugantar (Dasgupta; Forbes, 'Goddesses' 138). The attraction for the women lay partly in the fact that this novel (like Bankim's *Anand Math* and *Devi Chaudhurani* before it) featured women as active revolutionaries. For instance, Pritilata Waddedar of the Chittagong group of revolutionaries, 'learnt how Sumitra and Bharati of Sarat Chandra's *Pather Dabi* participated in the revolutionary movement, how Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay in his novel *Devi Chaudhurani* prepared

heroine Prafullamukhi for great sacrifices. Reading these books, Preeti [*sic*] was highly impressed and started dreaming of the day when she could be like one of those women' (Mandal 89; Joshi 39).

However, it was the charisma of the central character, Sabyasachi, also known as the Doctor, that these young women found particularly attractive. Kalpana Dutt (later Kalpana Joshi) – Pritilata's comrade in the Indian Republican Army, Chittagong Branch – recalls being so struck with their leader Surya Sen that she told Pritilata, 'Do you know, I think our Masterda [as Sen was called by his comrades] is greater even than Doctorda' (see Appendix 2 for more on Sen). She reports Preeti responding with, 'Yes, I think so too' (*Chittagong* 16). At that point, Pritilata had not met Surya Sen, but his reputation was legendary. Kalpana recalls the circulation of stories about

> how he slipped through a police cordon, dressed like an old mali (gardener). How he was seen talking to the village-folk dressed like a sanyasi. How he walked through village after village, in broad daylight, talking carelessly to a police officer companion, who did not know who he was talking to [. . .]. Uneducated village-folk used to say Surjya Sen knows mysterious 'mantrams' – nobody can catch him, he vanishes into thin air. He was a superman – what else can you call a man who kept the Government on tenterhooks all the time?
>
> Educated folk put the same feeling differently. [. . .] Some of them would describe where and how they had seen Surjya Sen, they would describe every glimpse they caught of the great leader and every word they heard. [. . .]
>
> The police tortured scores of people, trying to get them to inform on Surjya and his associates. But they never got a word out of them. [. . .] They were innocent, but they stuck it out and it never occurred to them to blame Surjya Sen for their sorrows.
>
> (*Chittagong* 14–15)[7]

Pather Dabi's Doctor-da was indeed uncannily like Chittagong's Master-da in his ability to elude capture, mesmerize his followers and embody implacable opposition to the British state.

In Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, published in book form a quarter of a century earlier, a Bengali named Hurree Chunder Mukherjee is a master of disguise, but trained by and in the service of the British state. *Pather Dabi*'s Sabyasachi, on the contrary, is, as a senior police officer describes him in tones of awe:

> a revolutionary! An enemy of the state! A worthy enemy indeed! The person who named him 'Sabyasachi' must've been really inspired. [. . .] He never misses a target with gun or pistol. He can swim across the mighty river Padma; nothing can stop him. [. . .] He can speak a dozen languages so fluently that one would find it difficult to guess what was his mother-tongue. He studied medicine in Germany, engineering in France, law in England, and since he lived for some time in America, he must've done something there as well. [. . .] The burning

> passion he has for his country is like an inextinguishable flame coursing through his veins! Torture him, torment him, it'll not cease as long as he lives! He has neither compassion, nor attachment, no faith in religion, no home, no hearth, nothing! One wonders how such a man was born at all in Bengal!
>
> (66–68)[8]

Sabyasachi's legendary attributes redeem Bengali masculinity, long constructed in imperial discourse as flawed and lacking.[9] Bharati, his young Bengali Christian protégé, believes 'that he knows everything that's worth knowing and does everything that's worth doing [. . .] indeed there's nothing that he can't do and doesn't know!' (*PD* 166–67).

Physically, however, Sabyasachi doesn't look like a warrior. When Apurba, an orthodox and rather callow Brahmin youth working in Burma (much of the novel is narrated through his experiences), first meets Sabyasachi, he sees a man whose

> age would not be more than thirty or thirty-two, but he appeared to be thin and emaciated [. . .] But he had the most remarkable pair of eyes. To describe them as large or small, round or slanted, bright or lacklustre, would be a futile exercise. It [*sic*] was like a deep unfathomable pond. Something in it hinted of danger; it seemed safer to keep at a distance. Somewhere at the bottom of this pond was hidden his frail life-force, where even death seemed afraid to enter; that was how he had escaped death so far.
>
> (72)

Kalpana Dutt recalls Masterda in comparable terms:

> He was a smallish short man, very reserved. Nobody would guess that this quiet man was the daring 'King of Chittagong'. There was nothing remarkable about his appearance [. . .] I was overwhelmed by this first meeting with Masterda. I felt a sense of joy, deep respect, wonder, a touch of fear – I felt I could do whatever he wanted to do at a moment's notice. I was bursting to tell anyone I met after that – 'I have talked to Surjya Sen!'
>
> (*Chittagong* 16)

I am not suggesting that Sabyasachi is directly modeled on Surya Sen. It is clear that his portrayal drew upon several contemporary figures. Tanika Sarkar speculates that the character 'seems to reflect the influence of vague information' then circulating about Dr. Sun Yat-sen (the novel suggests that Sabyasachi has had secret meetings with the Chinese leader) as well as the 'far-flung-out conspirational activities of the previous generation of Jugantar leaders' (453). Even more striking, it seems to me, are the parallels between Sabyasachi and M. N. Roy, who was instrumental in the formation of the Mexican Communist Party in 1911 as well as the CPI in 1920. Roy joined the underground group Anushilan as a young man and helped form Jugantar, but left India in 1915, travelling first to Java to obtain German arms and

then – using fake passports and names, literally all over the world – Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, Korea, Japan, USA, Mexico, Russia, and China.[10] Sabyasachi's movements are never clearly spelled out, but he too has operated in many of these places; he plans to go to Canton, for example: 'If my work does not take me to America', he says at one point, 'I'll return to Burma after visiting the islands in the Pacific' (243). At the very end of the novel he announces that 'God had not raised barriers and partitioned this world into thousands of prisons to suit the whims of men. [. . .] If a spark is ignited at one place, its flame is bound to spread . . .' (354).

But Sabyasachi is no M. N. Roy. Unlike the latter, Sabyasachi is not invested in organizing a communist party, or in mobilizing the working classes. Whereas Roy was an outspoken critic of dominant Indian attitudes to women and sexuality, Sabyasachi has not much to say on the subject. And in contrast to Roy, Sabyasachi is not really an internationalist – his activities in Burma are confined to the Indians there and the novel does not even mention Burmese anti-imperialist struggles of the time.[11] Still, Sabyasachi does subscribe to an essential division between 'East' and 'West', as indicated by his approving quotations of Kipling's famous line: 'East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet.' Asia is his point of reference in understanding colonial economics as well as resistance. The opium wars in China, he tells Bharati, expose the true 'politics of Christian civilization' (*PD* 286). He has enormous admiration for the Japanese:

> They're really a remarkable people! They were able to understand the true nature of the whites from the beginning. Two and a half centuries back they passed laws that as long as the sun and moon existed, no Christian would be allowed to set foot on their soil. Whatever faults they may have, for this alone they deserve my admiration!
>
> (*PD* 260)

Sabyasachi has operated in various parts of Asia. In the past, Indonesia was his main field of action, and it was in Bengkulu in Southwest Sumatra that he first met Sumitra, the striking female revolutionary who stands in sharp contrast to the soulful and empathetic Bharati.

If the figure of Sabyasachi draws upon several historical revolutionaries, there is certainly no real-life model for Sumitra. Whereas Sabyasachi is nondescript, she is flamboyantly beautiful:

> Though nearing thirty, she had a regal appearance. Her complexion was molten gold. Her hair was knotted loosely in the south Indian fashion. On her arms she wore several gold bangles and a portion of her necklace glittered around her neck. She wore emerald ear-tops which sparkled like the eyes of a serpent when light reflected upon them. Her forehead, chin, nose, eyebrows, hips were all flawless. Her beauty was extraordinary, unparalleled!
>
> (*PD* 121)[12]

Sumitra is the president of an organization called Pather Dabi, from which the novel gets its name. She has, as Bharati tells Apurba, 'travelled around the world alone. Except for the Doctor [Sabyasachi], I suppose there's none in this country as learned as her' (119). Like Sabyasachi, Sumitra speaks many languages. When we first see her, she is passionately championing the right of women to belong to political organizations, even if it means abandoning their marriages. The organization is discussing the case of Nabatara, a woman who wants to work to 'serve her country' rather than return to her husband. A friend of her husband argues that Nabatara will not 'be able to maintain her chastity while working for the country, in this crowd, and in her age' (122). Significantly, Sumitra doesn't counter him by suggesting that chastity and politics *are* compatible – 'whether she'll be able to retain what you describe as chastity, that is for her to say' – but affirms that 'if Nabatara, who couldn't love her husband and didn't consider it wrong to leave him for a nobler task, wants to teach this to other women, we shall not object'. Whereas Indian women are fed 'hackneyed meaningless clichés' about iconic wives like Sita and Savitri, if now

> Nabatara tells Indian women that once upon a time Sita had forsaken her husband and gone to the nether world in order to save her self-respect, and that the princess Savitri loved the poor Satyaban so deeply that she didn't hesitate to marry him even though she knew fully well that he was destined to die soon, and that Nabatara herself had left her villainous husband for whom she had no love, and that in similar circumstances other women should also act accordingly, such teaching will certainly be beneficial to them.
>
> (122–23)

These examples, it should be noted, speak about women's rebellion both *against* matrimony and *for* it.

To an appalled Apurba, Sumitra says, 'if and when women join their menfolk in the service of their country, only then will real work be done. Otherwise the work done by the men will disintegrate and nothing worthwhile will be achieved' (126). This rhetoric dovetails with Gandhi's statements about the importance of involving women in political actions.[13] And yet, there is a crucial difference: whereas Gandhi was at pains to assure men that nationalist politics would not harm the family, Sumitra's arguments are not just *for* women's participation in politics, but *against* their clinging to unhappy marriages.[14] Indeed, Sarat Chandra frames Sumitra's entire discourse as directed towards the dismantling of Gandhi's rhetoric about both women and sexuality: 'Chastity is not confined to the body alone', she points out; and rather than pretend that they love their husbands, women must 'overcome this fascination for a married life in which there is no love' (127–28).

Such proto-feminist articulations slowly fade from the narrative, and ultimately the novel severely limits the usefulness of women to revolutionary action. Sabyasachi reduces Nabatara's affair to a question of female resentment, even as he claims that he is not invested in such matters: 'I don't understand the affairs

of women or their show of pique. [. . .] The problem is that you can't do without women; on the other hand, if you associate with them, they create all sorts of trouble' (*PD* 138–39). To liberate women is merely 'social' work: 'You're all social reformers, but I've neither the time nor the inclination to be one' (137). But later he offers a contradictory opinion, stating that he will stay on in Burma because 'Here the women are very free; they realize the value of freedom. If ever you hear that there has been a revolution, wherever you may be at that time, know that it's the women of Burma who started it' (241). This juxtaposition between Burmese and Indian women has colonial roots. The British routinely proclaimed that the Burmese woman enjoyed an exceptionally high status compared to Indian women and Indian nationalists appropriated the idea. Gandhi noted that 'the freedom and energy of the Burmese women charmed just as much as the indolence of the men pained me' (even though he also announced that 'we who come from India are painfully surprised to see beautiful Burmese women disfigure their mouths by cheroots and cigars').[15] For Indian leaders, the continued colonization of Burma emphasized British hypocrisy, and was 'proof that British colonial rule merely deployed the "oppressive" treatment of women in India as a justification for refusing to grant India political reforms' (Ikeya 54). Thus it is both odd and yet not surprising that Sabyasachi, who cannot imagine Indian women as successful revolutionaries, displaces his revolutionary hopes on to Burmese women.

Sumitra next appears as an organizer of Indian factory workers: 'Punjabis, south Indians, Burmese, Bengalis, Oriyas, Hindus and Muslims, men and women – nearly a thousand of them', who live in miserable hovels. Both Bharati and she try to alleviate the alcoholism, promiscuity, and brawling that they perceive to be a result of poverty, but their aim is not merely social work. As Bharati tells the workers, 'Without unity you'll never be able to achieve anything. It's for your good that Sumitra-didi is working so hard. [. . .] Will this factory run even for a single day without your help? You are its real owners' (*PD* 171). The next day Sumitra holds a meeting:

> Somehow it got around that an exceptionally beautiful, powerful and widely travelled Bengali lady had recently arrived in Burma. She was strong enough to brush aside any obstacles that came in her way. She declared openly in the meeting that she would force the Sahib to grant various facilities to the workmen and also to double their wages.
>
> (176)

The workers have not actually seen her, 'but when an exaggerated, verging on superhuman account of her beauty and prowess reached the ears of these ignorant workers, it created a great stir among them. They had been terrorized, ill-treated and exploited, because they were weak' (176).

Again, Sabyasachi belittles this work, asserting that such trade unionism is not part of his political vision. Even though he offers long quasi-Marxist meditations on

colonial capitalism, he has in mind a much 'higher aim' than 'the betterment of a few factory workers'. To achieve this, he says,

> it may even become necessary to sacrifice these people one day like so many sheep and goats. [. . .] Their true emancipation can come only through revolution. [. . .] You must remember that revolutions cannot be achieved through peaceful means. Violence is essential for its success – this is both its curse as well as its boon! Look at Europe. It has happened in Hungary. It has taken place in Russia, not once but several times. [. . .] No government has given in peacefully to the right of the people for self determination.
>
> (*PD* 270–71)

Even as Sumitra organizes strikes, both she and Sabyasachi know that 'No strike can ever be successful if it isn't backed by violence. One has to turn to it as a last resort!' (272). Unlike Marxists, he believes that strikes merely impoverish workers, so 'once again the oppressed, vanquished, famished workers queue up before their murderers with begging bowls'. But this cycle is necessary, because 'the workers' defeat leads to a sense of anger and hatred that erupts one day! This brings about the revolution' (272–73).

Sabyasachi also embodies a political dedication so absolute that it leaves no place for matrimony or non-marital love. He eats little (including near-inedible food if necessary), hardly sleeps, and can live in utter squalor.[16] His material circumstances have no effect on his abilities to function. He is ascetic in relation to women. As Bharati, musing on the possibility that Sabyasachi might be sexually attracted to Sumitra or to herself, pronounces in awe:

> What to speak of me or Sumitra-didi, even if Indra, king of gods, were to order the three celestial nymphs – Urvashi, Menaka and Rambha – to break the vow of the modern Sabyasachi, instead of disturbing the religious austerities of the ancient sages, I'm sure they would have had to go back disappointed and disgraced. One can win the heart of a man of flesh and blood, but what can one do with one who has a heart of stone? Your anger against foreign domination has turned your heart into stone.
>
> (*PD* 300)

Here Sabyasachi's revolutionary dedication is compared not to Arjun, from whom his name derives, but to the rigorous austerities practiced by Hindu sages; his affective and sexual abstinence, like theirs, speaks to a mastery over his bodily desires. This was also exactly like the abstinence celebrated by revolutionary organizations. As Kalpana Dutt writes in her reminiscences, Surya Sen

> became a terrorist revolutionary in 1918. His guru was present at his wedding night and he never lived with his wife for ten years till her death in 1928. It was an iron rule for the revolutionaries that they should keep aloof from women.
>
> (*Chittagong* 16)

The story of Sabyasachi's political awakening also establishes the connections between masculinity, the Indian 'nation', and a Hindu lineage. As a child he had watched as his cousin was killed by dacoits for trying to help Vaishnava monks. The dying cousin exhorted Sabyasachi: 'Don't cry like a woman along with these sheep and goats, but never forgive those who have destroyed the manhood of this country to preserve their power' (*PD* 206–8). But despite using similar rhetoric, Pather Dabi is not a Hindu organization, unlike the Order in Bankim's *Anandmath*. Crucially, the enemy is different in each case: in Bankim's novel, the main oppressors are Muslims, to whom the British are preferable; in *Pather Dabi*, Sabyasachi notes that 'humanity has no greater enemy than the British. For their self-interest they turn humans into inhuman beings. This is their trade, their capital' (209). The novel suggests an intersection of British colonialism with capitalism. But like the mendicant Order in *Anandmath*, Pather Dabi also 'penetrates the innermost heart of any individual, leaving no room for private life except for his duty to the Order' (Govind 49). Spelled out in these novels is the precise ethos of all-consuming commitment that was to not only dominate revolutionary organizations in both Bengal and Punjab, but also, more unevenly, operate as an ideal within communist organizations.

In *Pather Dabi*, such an ascetic revolutionary creed is explicitly challenged by Ramdas Talwarkar, a Maharashtrian nationalist: 'Haven't householders any right to serve the country? [. . . .] Is the motherland only yours, not ours?' (*PD* 179). But even when they do not challenge this rule, it turns out that many members of Pather Dabi, especially the women, simply *cannot* practice asceticism, unlike Bankim's Shanti in *Anandmath*. Although everyone is 'prohibited from showing curiosity about the personal affairs of any member', we learn that Bharati, 'being a woman [. . .] had been able to understand Sumitra's feelings for Doctor [Sabyasachi]' (202–3). She understands that Sumitra's love for Sabyasachi is paramount and that her political activities are but a cover for it.[17] Bharati's own political choices are shaped by her attachment to the immature and callow Apurba. Thus, even as the novel is *avant garde* in featuring woman as political actors, it turns out that their political actions and commitments are driven by their romantic desires.

Bharati and Sumitra are not upper-caste Hindus, which makes them different from the young women who were inspired by the novel. Bharati is an impoverished Christian, without any family or community in Burma. Sumitra's past and lineage are distinctly shady; as Sabyasachi tells the story, she is really one Rose Dawood, the daughter of a Jewish mother and Bengali father, who 'first went to Java with a circus troupe and later got a job in the railway station at Surabaya' (*PD* 245). Educated in a missionary school until her father's death, 'she and her mother, along with two of her maternal uncles, one Chinese and two Muslims from south India, started a business in importing and exporting opium'. This confusingly international lineage also allows Sumitra to be positioned as both sexually and politically distinctive. Sabyasachi narrates how she had attracted his attention (but not his desire) on a train. Later, he recognized her at a jetty in Bengkulen:

> She was sitting on a trunk full of opium, surrounded by the police. As soon as she saw me, she began to cry. It was clear that I had to save her. I told the

> policemen that she was my wife. [. . .] Because this happened in Sumatra, I gave her the name Sumitra. [. . .] Though the magistrate released her, she was no longer prepared to release me.
>
> (245)

Although Sabyasachi's renaming of Sumitra Hinduizes her, it does not suggest husbandly commitment on his part.[18] In fact, he abandons her after the incident, but a year later she appears in his seedy hotel room in the island of Celebes, wearing a silk sari 'in the fashion of Hindu women and for the first time she bent down and took the dust from my feet as Hindu women do' (246). Sumitra's wifely longing has been already noticed by Bharati. Upon unsuccessfully pleading with Sabyasachi to delay his departure for a dangerous mission, 'Sumitra prostrated herself at Doctor's feet. She remained like that for a long while and when she slowly got up, her face remained downcast' (155).

In Sabyasachi's telling, Sumitra declared that she had 'wiped out her past' and asks him to take her in his organization: 'A person who can give up her way of life which she was used to for twenty-one years deserves my admiration. But she's very cruel' (*PD* 246). Bharati has not only intuited Sumitra's 'wifeliness' but experienced this streak of 'cruelty'. Upon discovering that the cowardly Apurba has betrayed Pather Dabi's secret activities to the police, the organization sentences Apurba to death. Sabyasachi, noticing that Bharati is falling in love with him, pardons Apurba, arguing that he is merely a 'weakling' who should be handed over to Bharati: 'Let her try to make a man out of him' (215). Sumitra vociferously challenges Sabyasachi's authoritarianism, but Sabyasachi asserts his position as supreme commander: 'You all know that my voice carries more weight than all of yours' (215). In Bharati's eyes, though, it is Sumitra's behaviour, not Sabyasachi's dictatorial manner, that is chilling:

> She did not consider Sumitra as her friend – indeed no woman could! – she also did not love her; but still she respected Sumitra for her excellence in every field. But her reverence had turned into terror that day when, despite being a woman, Sumitra had unhesitantly sentenced Apurba to death. [. . .] She could not think of Sumitra as belonging to the same sex as her.
>
> (250)

Thus, it is Sumitra's capacity for killing that unsexes her – a point to which I shall return later. Ultimately, when Apurba returns to the fold, it is not to work within Pather Dabi, but to move to rural India and work among peasants in a Gandhian way; as Sabyasachi notes with satisfaction, 'Apurbababu, I had assessed you properly, Sumitra had not' (352).

If Sumitra's lack of judgment is implicitly connected with her being unsexed, it is manifestly demonstrated by her increasingly close association with Brojendra, a repulsive character who embodies unbridled male lust. He is a 'fierce looking man',

dressed in ochre robes and a huge turban, whose rapacious temperament is linked to his racial identity:

> His face was round as an earthen pot and his body like a rhino's – huge, fleshy and rough. His beady eyes were almost entirely shorn of lashes and the hairs of his moustache were like spikes that could be counted at a distance. His skin was coppery. Even at a glance one could make out that the man was a Mongol and not an Aryan. Bharati was terrified even to look at him.
>
> (*PD* 212)

Brojendra is constructed as un-Aryan, the antithesis of the idealized Bengali masculinity embodied by Sabyasachi. One must remember that, at the time, elite Indians followed upon colonial racial classifications in laying claim to being Aryan.[19] It is no surprise, then, that despite this fierce appearance he turns out to be no match for the smaller but more masculine Sabyasachi, who announces that, despite his lack of nourishment, 'these lean fingers of mine can smash Brojendra's tiger-like paws to pieces' (*PD* 216). Brojendra has little political discipline, announcing: 'I am an anarchist, a revolutionary! Life is of no consequence to me. I'm prepared to give it as also to take it' (264). Since the novel suggests that sexual and political behaviour are accurate barometers of each other, it is no surprise to discover that Sabyasachi has been protecting Sumitra all along from Brojendra's lust, which is a 'passion . . .[that] knows no shame, no decorum, no decency – just a bestial lust. [. . .] Had I not been there to protect her, Sumitra would've committed suicide long ago' (268). Sumitra's reliance on Brojendra turns out to be not only a political but a sexual mistake. This is in keeping with the fact that the novel links political and sexual vocabularies so closely that whenever Sumitra acts against Sabyasachi's wishes in the organization, it appears as if she is pleading for an affective reaction from him, or punishing him for ignoring her.

The expressive and emotional Bharati provides a foil to the reserved and distant Sumitra. She is an ordinary worker, not a leader; and if Sumitra thinks of herself as Sabyasachi's wife, Bharati comes to occupy the place of a sister (towards the end of the novel, Sabyasachi does refer to himself as 'Bharati's elder brother' (*PD* 342). However, we never see Sumitra performing any domestic work, whereas Bharati insists on cooking and cleaning for Apurba and Sabyasachi. When the latter tries to stop her from making his bed, she protests: 'If this is not necessary for a woman, what else is, tell me?' (244). Sabyasachi too sees the two women differently. When he is leaving with Brojendra still at large, Bharati plaintively asks: 'Suppose I had been Sumitra, would you've deserted me even then?' His reply is succinct: 'But you're not Sumitra; you're Bharati [. . .] So I won't desert you. I'll entrust you with my work instead' (269).

However, despite Bharati's near deification of Sabyasachi – 'When he walks by, one wishes one could be part of the dust that he walks upon. Even then one doesn't feel satisfied!' (152) – she questions his methods constantly.[20] Unlike Sumitra, who inhabits the dispassionate and violent ethos of the organization with ease, Bharati

remains unconvinced by arguments for the necessity of violence. Indeed, Sabyasachi tells her repeatedly that she does not belong in Pather Dabi:

> There are so many institutions, big or small, that are doing good work in the country, like nursing the sick. [. . .] They'll show you the path. But I'm a revolutionary. I've no love, no affection, no compassion; good and bad are both meaningless to me. These acts of piety appear to me to be a child's play. (274)

Different as they are from one another, both Sumitra and Bharati are not part of polite Hindu society in Bengal, from which most women activists (of the Congress as well as the revolutionary organizations) emerged (Forbes 'Goddesses' 6; Sarkar 'Nationalism' 456). In other words, they are not *bhadramahilas*. Nevertheless, both embody at least one crucial trait of the ideal Hindu woman: complete and utter marital fidelity. Bharati is rejected as a possible partner by the orthodox and caste-conscious Apurba but, like Sumitra, she continues to adore the man she has chosen, arguing that 'a man's love is so fickle [. . .] as to be of no consequence. Apurbababu rejected me, but I still love him. That's all that matters' (*PD* 268). Just as Sumitra will work with Sabyasachi in any way she can, Bharati agrees to join Apurba in working among the rural poor in India. Their tie will not be sexual, for Apurba has decided to become an 'ascetic,' not 'out of religious fervour' but in order to 'devote myself to the service of my country and its people, especially the poor' (342).

But Sumitra is, in the end, parted from the peripatetic Sabyasachi, who takes off for distant shores via Singapore, where he hopes to find and kill Brojendra so that the latter's anarchism can never threaten the discipline of the organization again. She also plans to return to Java, where she has come into an inheritance. When Sabyasachi hints that this money will take care of him too: 'Sumitra's eyes were full of gratitude. Though she said nothing, her entire being seemed to cry out, "Whatever I have is yours, but will you touch it?"'(*PD* 310). Thus, both Bharati and Sumitra will function as quasi-wives to their men – as their political and personal supporters, their lovers without conjugality. The last line of the novel underlines the identical grief of both women when Sabyasachi disappears: Sumita weeps, and 'like her, profuse tears continued to roll down the cheeks of the other woman [Bharati] who stood near her' (355). The novel draws attention to the fact that in the future neither Bharati nor Sumitra will be part of Pather Dabi; nor will Nabatara, who had abandoned her husband for the organization. Her husband dead, she has married a Muslim, jilting a radical poet to whom she had been engaged. Sabyasachi refuses the idea that 'Pather Dabi will be wound up simply because three women decide to go away' (306). The first lesson 'we are taught', he says, is 'not to be upset over the loss of any member, however important he or she may be, and to find a substitute' (307).

This credo, that the organization is greater than any individual, shaped the revolutionary organizations far more than it did the Congress Party, even though both relied on charismatic leaders. But at the same time, it is through the cult of the

powerful leader – a cult that undercuts the idea that *no one* is more important than the organization – that the novel cements asceticism, discipline, chivalry, authoritarianism, and Aryanism as characteristics of the heroic revolutionary. Tanika Sarkar suggests that Sarat Chandra created Sabyasachi as a larger than life figure in order to portray a 'viable alternative to Gandhi', noting that 'Sabyasachi is identified with exactly those forces and tactics that were not used by Gandhi and [. . .] he mocks precisely those elements that did not go into Gandhi's movement' (Sarkar, 'Nationalism' 453).[21] When Bharati argues that 'unless you improve the lot of the peasants, you can have no real development of the country', Sabyasachi retorts:

> Pather Dabi was not established to work for the betterment of the peasantry; it was to help me win freedom for the country. Peasants and factory workers don't belong to the same category [. . .] you'll find me in the midst of factory workers, within the factory premises, you won't find me visiting the huts of the peasants in the villages.
>
> (*PD* 344–45)[22]

Sabyasachi also contrasts his politics with that of Swadeshi leaders. While they are careful not to violate the law with their fiery speeches, he is always guilty of sedition – for British law made it seditious for Indians to demand independence (280). His 'aim is not to do good to the country; it is to liberate the country' (288).

Pather Dabi meditates on different political options for Indians largely through lengthy conversations between Sabyasachi and Bharati. She is his main interlocutor, a feature of the book that must have been attractive to its female readers. Just as Bharati both deifies and disagrees with Sabyasachi, readers also admired and differed from him. Recall the exchange between the would-be revolutionary Bina Das and her father, with which I began this chapter: whereas her father espouses Bharati's pacifist views (on the grounds that they also reflect a 'woman's common sense'), Bina herself wrote an essay arguing for Sabyasachi's more violent methods. The romance of revolution created in *Pather Dabi* was attractive for those men and women who were impatient with Gandhian decorum and eager to follow a more radical path to freedom. There are ironies to be noted here: given that *Pather Dabi* severely qualifies the role of women as revolutionaries, we might suppose that had women like Bina read the novel as an accurate map of their own possibilities they might have felt less than inspired by its roadmap of women's activism. But at the time the novel was published, revolutionary organizations did not allow the Sumitras and Bharatis of Bengal to become members, so the very fact of the novel's representation of female revolutionaries proved enabling.[23]

There is more to be said for the power of the book. Affective relationships and liminal sexuality saturate it, despite – or perhaps *because of* – Sabyasachi's declared asceticism. Not only can a figure be desirable precisely on account of being unattainable, but as literary texts from different periods and contexts remind us, political and libidinal desires cannot be disentangled from one another. One

well-known instance, not too far from the context we are exploring, is of Bimala, the heroine of Tagore's novel *Ghare Baire*, whose desire for her husband's friend Sandip and passion for the Swadeshi movement which he leads are mutually constitutive.[24]

A similar dynamic shapes the terms in which revolutionary women described their attraction to their political heroes. Consider, for example, Kalpana Dutt's description of the fascination with which young women revolutionaries viewed Ananta Singh (another leader of the Chittagong group). He breaks chains like a 'White' giant, a 'Tarzan' in the circus: 'To us young girls he had become our 'Robin Hood' – a legend, a symbol of freedom and fearlessness' (*Chittagong* 22).[25] Or consider Kamala Dasgupta's charged and tremulous prose as she narrates how she joined a lathi-wielding class organized by Chattri Sangh (Female Student Association) at Bethune College.[26] There, her instructor Dinesh Mazumdar fanned her desires to follow his example:

> [He] was sturdy and strong and also handsome. [. . .T]he training was serious and silent. Words were spoken only when absolutely necessary. [. . .] In this man, I found great valour. [. . .] A flood of nationalism seemed to be raging all over India. The youths of the country grew restless and impatient. My heart began to throb.
>
> (Dasgupta 3–4)

Multiple registers of admiration and identification informed the popularity of *Pather Dabi* among young revolutionaries. It fostered women's aspiration to revolutionary activism by allowing them to desire and admire Sabyasachi's deeds, as well as to replicate and assist in them, as indeed the women in the novel did.

However, although the novel influenced many young revolutionary women – and although it was, in some ways, prescient about the gender dynamics of the organizations they joined – their own stories and voices indicate subjectivities that are far more varied and nuanced than those portrayed in this, or any other novel of the time. It is to them that the next section turns.

*

A British Intelligence report on 'terrorism' in India attributed the rise of women revolutionaries to the 'spectacular raids' undertaken against two British armouries and the telegraph office in Chittagong by the Indian Republican Army, led by Surya Sen, on 18 April 1930 (Hale 4).[27] It noted that

> Girls had from the first been connected with the party and were now being used to form links between those in jail and those absconding. Kalpana Dutta [*sic*] was active in this way [. . .]. Prililata Wadadhar [*sic*], another girl who was in league with the gang [. . .] took a leading part in a raid on the Pahartali Institute when bombs were fired from guns and revolvers [. . .]. The news of the Chittagong armoury raids was received by revolutionaries all over the province with amazement [. . .]. Recruits poured into the various groups in a steady stream and the

> romantic appeal of the raid attracted into the field of the terrorist party women and young girls, who from this time onwards are found assisting the terrorists as housekeepers, messengers, custodians of arms and sometimes as comrades.
>
> (Hale 31, 33, 34)

Another turning point came on 4 December 1931, when Suniti Chowdhury and Shanti Ghosh, two schoolgirls from Comilla, shot and killed the British Magistrate C. G. B. Stevens. While women had been increasingly active in the Civil Disobedience movement before this, Gandhi had been careful to describe their role in familial terms: they were to change the hearts and minds of men, and to nurture all the 'children of India' (Forbes, 'Goddesses' 1). This action changed those rules, rupturing 'the established norms of politicization' (Sarkar, *Bengal* 133). The next year, British intelligence reported that

> Terrorist activities on the part of Bengali women have been causing anxiety to the police for some time past. A report received last month indicated that there were at least forty Bengali women who were members of terrorist organisations in Dacca and Calcutta [. . .]. A more recent report indicates that throughout Bengal the number of female terrorists known to the police is about 100. The increase in the number of women who are concerned in terrorist conspiracy has been very marked, and can be attributed mainly to the direct appeals that have been made to them by political leaders to take more interest in politics [. . .]. In Bengal, the dividing line between political activism and terrorism is narrow. Many of the most active political workers are terrorists, and the association of women with such persons naturally results in the recruitment of some of them into the ranks of terrorism. This recruitment is facilitated by the practice of co-education which is now prevalent in colleges in Calcutta. The resort of some women to active participation in crime in Bengal is proof of the widening of the basis of the terrorist movement in that province.[28]

How did revolutionary women themselves understand and inhabit this new phase of politics? Each of their activities involved proving themselves to their male comrades. There was, for instance, the fear that they would not be able to resist torture. Bina Das narrates how the girls

> heard many inhuman stories of police torture – charging with batteries, forcing one to sit on ice, sticking pins into nails and many others. One had to be extremely strong willed to suffer these cruelties. [. . .] The excruciating methods applied by the Intelligence Branch officers often went way beyond human endurance.
>
> (22)

Yamuna, a young woman who had posed as a revolutionary's wife, was raped by soldiers of the Baluch Regiment. Nanibala Devi Mukherjee, the first woman to

join a revolutionary group, had also been tortured extensively in Benaras. She was stripped naked, tortured, with chili powder thrust inside her vagina, and confined in an airless cell, an event that prompted male revolutionaries to consider the possibility of admitting young women into their fold (Mukherjee 66; Dutta Gupta, *Identities* 105). The girls had to prove they were equal to such brutality. To prove herself, Anima Biswas of the Chittagong Revolutionary Party had to pass a night alone in a dark cremation ground. Surya Sen asked the girls to increase their tolerance for physical pain by making a slight cut in the middle of their chest to shed one or two drops of blood every day. Initiation rituals of various kinds involved similar cutting, but what is different and striking here is that the gesture had to be repeated daily, almost as if the female revolutionary had to demonstrate her faith repeatedly.

In the early years of the revolutionary movement, Kumudini Mitra had propagated a motto in the pages of the magazine *Suprobhat:* 'The Motherland needs blood' (Mandal 43–44, 52). The familiar iconography of nation as mother worked differently for men and women, for women were both the children of the motherland and symbols of the motherland.[29] Subhas Chandra Bose had inscribed as an autograph for Shanti Ghosh: 'To preserve your honour, take up arms yourselves, ye mothers' (Mandal 40). In cutting their own bodies to affirm their faith and strength, revolutionary women were embodying at once both the motherland and the heroic child who is asked to shed blood for her. In the ritual of cutting their breast, they were being asked to both efface (deface) their femininity and be acutely conscious of it. But it was not enough to be able to suffer pain; women revolutionaries also had to show that they could inflict pain on others. As they prepared to assassinate District Magistrate Stevens, Suniti Chowdhury and Shanti Ghosh had been told that young girls could not possibly shoot a tall European and that their failure would reflect badly on the organization. The girls countered by asking whether their male counterparts had always been successful: 'Is there no one who has failed? Then if we fail why will it be scandalous?' (Mandal 78). Thus, although commentators on revolutionary women regularly downplay their desire for equality with men and emphasize their anti-colonial ardour, it is clear that these desires were mutually constitutive.

As is well known, the organizations that revolutionary women joined were structured like patriarchal families, except that there was no sexual activity permitted for the participants. Underground organizations wanted to foster an emotional creed of a very particular kind – a creed encapsulated in Surya Sen's belief that his comrade Ananta Singh was 'swayed too much by sentiment. His deep humanity can become a source of weakness in a revolutionary'. Dutt comments:

> In those days our common idea was that revolutionaries should be hard, austere, aloof. [. . .H]e [Ananta] was strongly against taking girls into the revolutionary force – he did not trust us. So much so, he would not trust men who were associated with any girl. [. . .] That is why I was both thunder-struck and overjoyed when he sent me details about his new project. [. . .] So I set to work to prepare gun-cotton and other explosives. Strictly according to his

> instructions, I used to bring bottles of acids from Calcutta. I was only 16 or 17 years old at that time. But I felt I could do anything.
>
> (*Chittagong* 26–27)

To be allowed in by idolized men was no small achievement for a young woman.

FIGURE 1.1 Young Kalpana Dutt

(Courtesy: Gargi Chakravartty)

In Bengal, each revolutionary cell had a 'dada' [elder brother] at its head. Women were the younger sisters to their 'dadas', who commanded, nurtured, and punished them; in their writings, they attested to hero-worshipping these men, and they in turn played 'didis' (elder sisters) to younger men in the organization. There was to be no curiosity about orders from above. The girls also had little idea of the connection between one group and another, and were often shocked to learn from the pattern of arrests that their own organization had been involved in particular attacks. There was little emotional or sexual intimacy permitted among the revolutionary men and women, little mixing beyond what was necessary for the movement (Bandopadhyay 35).

If reverence for the motherland, personified as a heroic women or goddess, coupled with sexual abstinence had been the creed of male revolutionaries, their female counterparts had to embrace it too. 'Most of us in the party were driven by the same frenzy', Bina Das writes. 'We had nothing to ask for ourselves. There was not the least occasion for self-indulgence or relaxation or enjoyment in our lives.' Their instructors were clear about priorities: '"Do not forget that you are professional revolutionaries", we were reminded all the time. [. . .] We believed that the youth of the country had no right to happiness in their personal lives until the country rose out of its misery as a free nation. This was truly our conviction' (Das 21). The idea of a 'professional revolutionary' was to linger and become central to communist culture later.

It was precisely because revolutionary women understood themselves as transgressive that they needed to justify their actions by replicating the gendered vocabularies that were everywhere around them. They were at pains to emphasize that, although they were exceptional, they were not deviant. Consider Bina Das's confessional statement after she shot Bengal Governor Stanley Jackson on 6 February 1932. This is an extraordinary document, written in English, and it circulated around the country and the world. Echoing the commonplace that colonial rule has emasculated Indians, Bina writes that the recent governmental ordinances passed to repress revolutionary activities 'came as a challenge to our national manhood and as indignities hurled at it. This hardened even the tender feminine nature like mine into one of a hero's mould' (Mandal 141–43).[30] While she understands 'feminine nature' to be antithetical to heroic exploits in normal times, it is the extraordinary situation of India, 'groaning under the tyranny of a foreign Government' that has 'unsexed even a frail woman like myself, brought up in all the best traditions of Indian womanhood'.

Gandhi used the comparison between deviant sexualities and deviant politics to disparage women in revolutionary movements who were, in his view, abnormal and 'unsexed' (quoted in Forbes, *Women* 155). Here Das explains that they are compelled to become so. Her use of the word 'unsexed' is striking. Given that Das had studied English Honours at Diocesan College, it is likely that she came across it in Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*. There Lady Macbeth hopes for the courage to stick with the plan of murdering the King; she asks the 'spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts' to 'unsex' her and to

> Make thick my blood.
> Stop up th'access and passage to remorse,
> That no compunctious visitings of nature
> Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
> Th'effect and it. Come to my woman's breasts,
> And take my milk for gall.
>
> (Greenblatt et al. I, 5, 50–56)

Lady Macbeth fears that her female 'nature' might get in the way of the fortitude required for the act, and her speech reminds us that the equation of decisiveness and courage with manliness was not unique to Bengali, Hindu, or Indian culture. However, the iconography of the militant Hindu goddess like Durga and Kali provided a powerful model for women as guardians and avengers of culture. Like Lady Macbeth, female revolutionaries asserted not only their femininity, but also their ability to embody traits regarded as masculine. In doing so, they drew attention to the gap between the two, to the effort needed to make the move from one to the other.

Revolutionary women inspired each other. Bina Das possessed a pamphlet with photographs of the young Suniti and Shanti with the words 'Rakte Amar' (My Blood) scribbled on top (Ghosh 360). Indeed, in some ways her formal confession can be seen as directly answering those who condemned the murder of Magistrate Stevens. For instance, Vallabhbhai Patel, then President of the Congress, had declared it 'a heinous crime and unbecoming of the traditions of Indian womanhood', and B. C. Roy, the Mayor of Calcutta, had pronounced the murder 'particularly shocking on account of the sex of the alleged assailant' (quoted in Mandal, 81). At that time, newspapers in India and abroad widely noted the scandalously defiant attitude of the two girls when they were sentenced to transportation for life. The *New York Times* commented on their appearance in court in 'red saris and with their hair adorned with lotus flowers', their singing of nationalist songs, and their declaration that 'it was better to die outright than to spend their lives in a place like a horse's stable' (28 January 1932).

But those who came later did not simply hark back to their predecessors; they too attempted to push the boundaries further. Whereas Bina Das's action was a solitary one undertaken without the sanction of her group, Pritilata Waddedar was asked by Surya Sen to lead a band of men in an attack on the European Club at Pahartali in September 1932. She cross-dressed as a man for the action, and swallowed potassium cyanide after it ended. The leaflet found on her body replicates some of the terms of Bina Das's confessional statement. At first, she writes, she wondered why her leader, 'a towering personality placed the heavy burden of leadership on a girl like me [. . .] when there were so many hard-working and worthy brothers? But after a while I bowed my head in complete obedience and accepted the order of my revered leader' (Waddedar 265–67). She knows that many of her countrymen will wonder how a woman 'Nursed in the high ideals of Indian womanhood [. . .] be engaged in such a ferocious task as murdering a man.' But then, unlike Bina, she ventures further, going so far as to question 'the

distinction made between man and woman in the struggle for freedom in our country'. If women can fight with men in the Satyagraha movement, then why not in 'armed rebellion'? She knew that women in other countries had joined such rebellions – so 'why should Indian women regard this path of revolution as something wrong'?

Waddedar goes on to hope that her sisters will 'no longer nurse the view that they are weak', expressing her certainty that 'armed women of India will demolish a thousand hurdles, disregard a thousand dangers' as they join the rebellion. Her invocation of the example of foreign women revolutionaries is significant, as it openly challenges the nativist prescription for Indian women to adhere to their unique culture and stay away from the baleful example of the West. One typical instance of this ethos could be found in an article entitled 'Horrible Outrage', published in the wake of the Stevens assassination in the newspaper *The Liberty*, which expressed a worry 'that the Western method of violence [. . .] finding votaries even among our womanhood should give cause for anxiety to all right-minded men and women alike' (Mandal 87). Pritilata is rhetorically strategic: after invoking foreign revolutionary women, she turns to women in satyagraha movements, thus evoking an acceptable form of female political activity to normalize a seemingly unacceptable one.[31] There is, though, a problem in using this statement as an index of Pritilata's understanding of militant activities or herself – it is probable that it was edited by Surya Sen (Chatterjee, *Do and Die* 256). We cannot therefore be sure how much, or which parts, of this vocabulary of female honour, power, and national pride comes from the female revolutionary, and how much from her 'elder brother'.

Still, it is evident that the terms in which revolutionary women understood and explained their own actions were not identical across the board. Leela Nag (later Roy), the first woman to be part of the leadership of a revolutionary organization, challenged Gandhi's opinion that it was 'degrading both for man and woman that woman should be called upon or induced to forsake the hearth and shoulder the rifle for the protection of the hearth. It is a reversion to barbarity and the beginning of the end' (quoted in Dutta Gupta, *Identities* 100).[32] She proclaimed, 'Such artificially constructed divide between the home and the world is absolutely unnecessary – all workplaces outside the house or inside should be equally accessible to both men and women and they should have equal rights in exercising their choice according to their disposition and needs' (quoted in Dutta Gupta, *Identities* 100–1). Shantisudha Ghosh also questioned the connotations of traditional wifely ornamentation like 'sindur' and conch bangles, advocated women's rights to divorce and to economic equality, and suggested that women should burn Hindu religious texts 'just as the Harijans of Nasik have set fire to Manusamhita' (Bandopadhyay 32).

Unfortunately, this enabling and radical connection between the inequities of caste and gender was not taken up by revolutionary women, nor indeed by the women's movement for decades to come. But not all militant women upheld the paradigms of 'good' Indian womanhood. While many certainly meshed their religious faith with their political creed, as had been powerfully modelled in novels like *Anandmath*, others began to articulate an oppositional critique of conventional

expectations of women's behaviour and carriage. Nor did these two models stand in opposition, as revolutionary women often differed in their views of what kind of political action was needed. Thus Pritilata Waddedar, whose first political initiation was into Leela Nag's proto-feminist organization Deepali Sangh, rejected what she thought of as 'women's work' and was more attracted to direct political action of the kind offered by Surya Sen and his comrades. Sarmistha Dutta Gupta comments that the choice reflects her internalization of 'the ideological position that the work of women's organisations was 'social' and never equal in importance to the 'political' work done by men' ('Death' 63). In the decades that followed, this divide between the social (understood as the social reform of women's position in society) and the political (constituted by direct anti-colonial action) was to a great extent bridged by women activists in the Communist Party.

The hardest challenge for activist women was the punitive ethos of sexual purity. Both Gandhian nationalism and revolutionary nationalism, despite their differences, dovetailed in celebrating ideals of sexual restraint and female chastity. Precisely because revolutionary women did challenge so many social and cultural norms, they were vulnerable to the charge of promiscuity (as I will discuss in the next chapter). The British authorities also tended to view them in this way, speculating that Pritilata Waddedar was 'the lover of Nirmal Sen', one of her male comrades, and also the 'mistress of the terrorist Biswas'.[33] Manini Chatterjee, Kalpana Dutt's daughter-in-law, speculates that that is perhaps why Kalpana 'spoke of her own brush with a doomed love' for her comrade Tarakeshwar Dastidar only in her last years. Her leader, Surya Sen 'did not like it at all [. . .He] showed an unnecessary curiosity and resentment about her innocent conversations with Tarakeshwar' (*Do and Die* 288). Kalpana chafed at such surveillance. Once, she confessed in a later interview, she told him off: I did not leave my family for such nonsense' (*Agniyug* 121).[34] When Tarakeshwar and Kalpana were arrested after being on the run together for months, he asked her if she would wait for him to be together, and she agreed. Ten years later, when Kalpana had joined the CPI, its general secretary P. C. Joshi proposed marriage. She told him of her earlier promise, and agreed to marry Joshi only after she was convinced that Tarakeshwar had been hanged in jail. However, Kalpana's memoirs and interviews give us no sense of this history; Tarakeshwar is barely mentioned in the former, and when he is, it is as another of the dadas – Phutuda. 'But', writes Chatterjee, 'in her twilight years, memories of that first love would occasionally return to haunt her' (*Do and Die* 291). It took her these many years before she could wander more freely through her own history.

Today, given that Indian nationalist history and sentimentality have so thoroughly rehabilitated and rendered banal the revolutionary movement, it is all too easy to emphasize its women's adherence to mainstream values and underplay the extent to which they did destabilize existing norms. One measure of the latter is that in their own day they were often described as unnatural. It is clear that they catalysed fears that all gender roles were in danger of being turned upside down. One article in *The Times of India* entitled 'Male-clad girls. What a young man thinks of them' began by noting that Kalpana Dutt wore male attire while underground and went on to

wonder 'what limits the modern girl will go to in her "craze" for wearing garments which, hitherto, have been the chief means of distinguishing one sex from the other' (29 May 1933). It ended by noting that two cross-dressed women were mobbed on Brighton Beach in England, and swore they would never wear men's clothing again. Here, the specific anti-colonial aspects of Kalpana's actions are downplayed as she is assimilated into a cross-cultural spectre of the mannish woman. There was widespread local admiration for the revolutionaries – Kalpana Dutt has described in detail how, despite great police atrocities, local villagers supported them and would not give them up to the authorities. However, many of these young women were not accepted back into their own families, in Bengal as well as in North India. While a large number of them later joined other political organizations, such as the CPI or the Congress, others found it hard to get jobs and faced penury (Mandal 136–37).

The defiance of revolutionary women also came at a psychic and material price that is largely elided in the many romanticized accounts of them.[35] It was not easy for them to renounce their families, hide matters from them, or, worse, turn their back upon their financial needs, as Pritilata had to do when she went underground despite being her family's sole breadwinner. Bina wrote to her parents from prison:

> Do not call me. Let me lie here alone.
> Holding on with my two weak hands
> To my life's work,
> My greatest glory, my greatest shame
> You did not like my work
> My motherland has turned her face
> But, lo! On my futile life's work
> Lies my creator's benediction.
>
> (Das 26)

Eventually, Bina's parents came to support her work and offered her unconditional love, but the poem attests to her persistent feeling that they did not approve of her action and its consequences.

It was also not easy to experience the death of comrades. No matter how aloof they were supposed to remain, the bonds between them were obviously very powerful. The closeness bred of days and nights in the underground cannot be underestimated. Pritilata describes how she tried but failed to reach Nirmal Sen in their hideout when they were surrounded by the police:

> Still there was that plaintive voice of Nirmalda: 'Rani, Rani! [her pseudonym]. [. . .] The heart-breaking call was beyond my endurance. I did not know what Nirmalda would have told me if I could be near him at his last moment of life. [. . .] This failure had been pricking my heart all the time and my power of endurance was almost at its end.
>
> (Waddedar 253)

Kalpana Dutt noted that Pritilata, who she describes as this 'fearless' woman, 'suddenly became softened and could not tear herself away from a wounded comrade' (*Chittagong* 55). Nirmal Sen's death and that of Ramakrishna Biswas haunted Pritilata, who told Surya Sen, 'they beckon me to come to them'. It is clear that she planned to die; she asked Sen for potassium cyanide and asked him to 'Bless me that I may join the group of martyrs after accomplishing my task' (Mandal 94).

It is hard to say whether it was the difficulty of life in the underground, depression following the death of comrades, or the desire for martyrdom that drove Pritilata to decide on suicide. Before the action at the club, she had written an anguished letter to her mother:

> Mother, did you call me? [. . .] Pardon me mother, I have given you great pain. I offer my blood to wipe the tears of the motherland. You bless me, or my desire will not be fulfilled. Forgive me mother, pardon me today.
>
> (quoted in Mukherjee 69)

As Ishanee Mukherjee writes,

> the tragic dichotomy between her social and political beings tormented her soul [. . ..] Pritilata was the paradigm of a rebel woman reared in the high ideals of Indian femininity in search of a revolutionary identity. In her was projected the psychological conflict of women in transition from sedate, subsidiary roles to direct revolutionary action.
>
> (69)

But perhaps the bifurcation between a conservative social identity and a radical political one was less stark than we imagine. It is clear that these women had already stepped out of conventional roles when they joined the movement and were, moreover, convinced that, to be a revolutionary, it was necessary to embody the ideals of Indian womanhood.

The vocabulary of sacrifice and martyrdom allowed them to suggest as much. Bina Das claimed that 'my object was to die, and to die nobly fighting against this despotic system of governance'. She thought that her own 'immolation' and that of a 'son of England' would 'awaken' India and England; her 'pain was unbearable and [she] felt [she] would go mad if [she] could not find relief in death'. And all the revolutionaries were conscious of the odds against them – Chatterjee notes that their slogan 'Do *or* die' was changed to 'Do *and* die.'

In 1934, Cornelia Sorabji, the first Indian woman to practice law, wrote an article defending the British treatment of political prisoners in jail. 'Women detenus and terrorists', she proclaimed, consisted of two 'classes'. The first were:

> The educated, fully equipped to serve their country, who are caught by the 'Sacrifice yourself' slogan, and finding in their blood the response which their forbears gave to 'suttee' – give soul, brain, and body, unthinking – to the revolutionary cause.

And then there were:

> The younger women and school girls, usually very pretty, and very immature, incapable of understanding politics, but caught through their senses. Here it is the sexual impulse upon which men play for their own political ends. Some of the girls are just wrecks – mind and body. Worst of all are the women who traffic in women, as well as in explosives, for concealing which so many are in jail.
> (76)

Both of Sorabji's statements, intended to disparage revolutionary women, are worth considering. In the second half of her statement, Sorabji suggests that some young women – the 'immature' ones – were joining the movement not because of their political convictions, but because they were sexually attracted to the men in it – men all too willing to take advantage of this immaturity. This is precisely the idea that Tagore used as a premise for *Char Adhyay,* which I consider next.

In Sorabji's first statement, possibly picking up on Prilitata's references to her suicide as immolation, a comparison links the self-sacrificial impulse of women revolutionaries to a similar impulse in the sati, the widow who immolates herself on her husband's pyre. That comparison has stuck, and has been repeated *ad nauseum*. It forms the basis for Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's well-known essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' In this essay, Spivak offers an extended discussion of how the colonial archives 'silenced' particular colonized subjects. While the archives tell us what British colonialists or Indian pundits have to say about the sati – the widow who immolated herself on her husband's pyre – we have no idea what she herself might have thought or felt. Thus, the sati becomes emblematic of a 'subaltern' subject who cannot 'speak'. In the essay's conclusion, Spivak offers another example of such a subject – this time, a young revolutionary woman, Bhuvaneshwari Bhaduri, who hanged herself after failing to carry out a political assassination in 1926:

> Bhuvaneswari had known that her death would be diagnosed as the outcome of illegitimate passion. She had therefore waited for the onset of menstruation. While waiting [. . .she] was no doubt looking forward to good wifehood.
> (307)

Spivak laments that, years later, the members of Bhuvaneswari's family still insist on erasing her politics and describing her suicide as a case of 'illicit love'. So, she concludes, the young woman's voice is stifled.

The jump from the figure of the sati to that of the revolutionary woman is what interests me here. Although Spivak spends ample time discussing the colonial and nationalist constructions of sati, she says nothing about contemporary discourses of anti-colonial nationalism. Nor does she consider the kind of revolutionary group Bhuvaneswari might have been involved in, or what kind of subject she might have been. Barbara Harlow rightly points out that Spivak's account is uninterested in

> what may have impeded Bhaduri in her mission; her own 'weakness', material circumstances, a breakdown in the organization's political coordination?

> [. . .Why] must Bhaduri, in her particular function as a female member of the resistance, be obliged to prove herself and maintain the confidence of her male comrades?
>
> (34)[36]

As I have shown, the writings and testimonies of young revolutionary women like Bhuvaneswari have a lot to teach us about the issues Harlow raises. There is no evidence that they were necessarily 'looking forward to good wifehood'. Indeed, Shantisudha Ghosh, one of the members of the Jugantar Group, would later publish incisive critiques of the institution of marriage, a few years after Bhuvaneshwari's suicide (Dutta Gupta, *Identities* 154–55). When they used the language of martyrdom, even if they used the word 'immolation', were they invoking the husband-worshipping sati? It is worth noting that men also used a similar language of immolation. As Simona Sawhney too has shown in 'Death in Three Scenes of Recitation', one finds simultaneous use of the available languages of passion, love, and political martyrdom in revolutionary discourse of the time.

Nevertheless, Spivak's observation that Bhuvaneswari rewrote the text of sati-suicide is canny for reasons others than the ones she gives. Today, these women are celebrated as national martyrs, a status made possibly by ignorance of the contradictions and conflicts, both social and psychological, that they negotiated – not to mention the complexity and unevenness of their political views. The nationalist assimilation of revolutionary women has in fact turned them into quasi-satis, figures who are to be revered because they wanted to die for the nation.[37] As I have shown, however, these women were redefining this idea of the nation by the very fact and nature of their participation in the revolutionary movement. Many of them, as subsequent chapters will show, moved towards a Marxist understanding of the colonial situation. Even when they did not, they often chafed against patriarchal norms that permeated nationalist and revolutionary organizations. Although they did not openly critique these norms, their actions and their pronouncements, uneven and sparse as they are, have not been totally erased from the archive. They simply beg to be read differently, against the grain of either nationalist hagiography or post-modern despair.

*

In October of 1934, Rabindranath Tagore published *Char Adhyay*, his last novel, which came on the heels of a relentless government crackdown upon the revolutionary underground. Surya Sen had been hanged in January of that year. British authorities noted with satisfaction that 'there had been a distinct change for the better' and that, after the arrests of 'no less that 3,110 persons', revolutionary actions had declined: 'whereas in 1933 there had been an average of eight crimes a month, by September 1934 the average for the year had dropped to 1.5 a month' (Hale 7, 60). While terrorist recruitment continued, 'It appeared that many persons who had been "sitting on the fence" now began to realize that terrorism was a dangerous two-headed weapon liable to get out of control.' They pointed out that once the 'nationalist press,

which had cleverly vaunted terrorist atrocities', had been curbed by legislation, 'the general public came to realize that terrorists were more dangerous than useful'. They further noted that 'parents were beginning to believe that the danger of their children being led astray was considerable and [. . .] not a figment of the imagination of the police' (7, 61). The authorities were right about changing attitudes towards revolutionaries, particularly among women; by this time, as Sarkar points out, the Congress had disassociated itself very clearly from underground organizations ('Nationalism' 456; *Bengal* 148–55).

Whereas previous political novels in Bengal had emphasized the ascetic nature of revolutionary movements, *Char Adhyay* suggests that they used beautiful women to entice young men into their organizations. In his earlier novel *Ghare Baire*, Tagore had already shown that the nationalist iconography of Bharat Mata, which simultaneously objectified and deified women, had a powerful hold on real women. There, his heroine Bimala is drawn by passion to the nationalist movement – a passion that spills over into, and is itself enhanced by, her attraction for Sandip, a charismatic but shallow and somewhat cynical leader of the Swadeshi movement. *Char Adhyay*'s heroine Ela is, unlike Bimala, educated and unmarried; she works as the headmistress of a school. But in her involvement with a militant underground organization, she too allows herself to be turned into a political icon, a puppet in the hands of Indranath, the leader and mastermind of the group. If Bimala's attraction to nationalism was shaped and enhanced by her desire for Sandip, here Atin, an exceptionally brilliant young man, joins the group because of his passion for Ela. Tagore's views become clear in the shape of each novel: Bimala is eventually disillusioned by Sandip (and the Swadeshi movement); Atin feels increasingly alienated from the organization's brutal methods, and so, more inchoately, does Ela.

The twinning of politics and romance is quite divergent in the two books – whereas in *Ghare Baire* Bimala returns from the grip of Sandip, tragically late, to her husband, Ela and Atin's passion is mutual, their commitment deepening. But their love is rendered tragically impossible by their commitment to the organization, with its distorted notion of the sacrifices necessary for political work. Worse, the novel suggests that such commitment leads to a betrayal of one's 'own dharma, the truth of your innermost self' (Tagore 34). A circular logic is established: with the betrayal of one's inner self, it is neither possible to love another person truly, or to simply walk away unsullied from the organization. The novel ends with Atin killing Ela at the behest of the organization. His act reflects both his obedience to its dictates, and – ironically – a desperate attempt on both their parts to register their resistance to its demands, since Ela herself wants to die rather than to live without Atin.

There are differences of critical opinion about the novel's literary merits – with one critic describing it as one of Tagore's 'poorest productions [. . .] conceived more as a drama than as a novel [. . .] more an indignant message than a novel' and another as Tagore's 'most gestural work', reflecting 'a writer's search for a language and form that will bear [. . .] the burden of its own times' (Sarkar, 'Nationalism' 457; Bhattacharya, in Tagore 109). Responding to critiques of the novel, Tagore himself complained about readers who viewed it as an historical or ideological comment on revolution, rather

than responding imaginatively to it 'as literature:' 'In this text', he argued plaintively, 'the description of this revolution is secondary; its literary qualities are to be found in the intensity and pain of the protagonists' passion unfolding in the storm of the revolution. Polemical arguments and morals are the stuff of newspaper articles' (Tagore 147).

But it was hardly possible for any contemporary reader to unyoke the protagonists' passion from the novel's description of revolution. On the one hand, a 1935 police dispatch to the Home Office noted that the Public Prosecutor of Calcutta had recommended 'the forfeiture of the book under the Press Emergency Powers Act of 1931'. It quoted a source in Calcutta writing that in this novel Tagore 'has extolled the revolutionary cult in Bengal'. The Report itself concluded, 'This is what one would expect with respect to any Bengali novel in which the hero and heroine are terrorists' (Tagore ix). On the other hand, even a cursory reading of the novel could hardly support the view that it endorsed terrorism, and ultimately the novel was not proscribed. Revolutionaries themselves were stunned by *Char Adhyay*. As Saroj Acharya, one of the Chittagong revolutionaries, wrote: 'How could our Rabindranath write such a novel? And at such a time? [. . .] We were upset and hurt wondering how could Rabindranath represent our revolutionary efforts in Bengal and the character of the revolutionary so lightly [. . .] as a voluble love story?'[38]

The love story, though, is precisely what cradles the political and philosophic weight of these efforts; or perhaps it is more accurate to suggest that Tagore condemns the revolutionary movement by pitting it resolutely against the romantic aspirations of Atin and Ela. To suggest that there is no space for love stories within the revolutionary movements is not necessarily to damn the latter; after all, the revolutionaries often claimed with great pride their asceticism and their single-minded devotion to their cause. But Tagore suggested that the repression of romantic love was only a powerful indicator of a larger set of ethics suppressed by the revolutionaries. What exactly constituted such ethics is not clearly specified – as I suggested earlier, the argument is somewhat circular, for the ethical and the political are necessarily counterposed by Tagore. Revolutionary politics jeopardizes ethics, leading to a point where personal ties and sexual attraction are also instrumentalized or suppressed. In becoming part of the movement, and in agreeing to such manipulation, Atin and Ela, each in a different way, betrayed their own true natures (*swabhava*) and ethics. Romantic and sexual love is thus the fulcrum of Tagore's humanist and supposedly ethical critique of revolutionary nationalism. This theme is developed quickly and without many frills. In a Preface that was deleted from post-1950 editions of the novel, Indranath recruits a young Ela who, having refused many offers of marriage, is desperate for a job. He offers her the post of the principal of a girls' school, telling her:

> As soon as I saw you, I felt you to be a woman heralding the new age – the age beckons from within you. You will have to bind yourself by an oath that you will never bind yourself in the ties of domesticity. The social world is not for you. You do not belong to society. You belong to the nation.
>
> (Tagore viii, ix)

In Indranath's vision sexuality must be tamed, disciplined and sublimated in service of the nation (this form of sublimation was an important part of nationalist commitment in the novels of Bankim too). The novel itself opens after some years have passed. Ela is teaching in the school and her only political work lies in recruiting young men for Indranath. She is bait for them, luring them to a life of violence. She does have doubts about 'our mode of work [that] seems to follow an erratic volition that is beyond all judgment and discrimination. I do not like it. It's as though all the boys are being slaughtered in a sacrifice to an unseen blind power' (6). Indranath compares her doubts to those entertained by the warrior Arjun before the battle of Kurukshetra in the *Mahabharata*, to be brushed aside, as Krishna counsels Arjun, in 'the call of duty' (6–13). He also attributes her qualms to her maternal instinct to nurture these young boys and offers instead another quasi-theological image for her being and role in the movement, telling her that she is 'the manifestation of primeval female energy, of *Shakti*. This you can prove only by leaving behind the quagmire of kindness and sympathy and moving onto former shores. Give us power. Give strength to men' (6).

Unlike the real-life revolutionaries who did not want men and women to mingle or fall in love, Indranath wants to use Ela's beauty to 'inflame' male recruits. But he does not subscribe to the iconography of the nation as mother; instead he tells Ela, 'the nation is Ardhanareshwar' (the half-man and half-woman figure who represents the composite form of the god Shiva and his consort Parvati). For him such a concept can only be 'realized in the unity of man and woman. Do not imprison it in domesticity and sap its strength' (Tagore 12). Men and women must mingle, can even love, but must not give this love the conventional form of domesticity. Indranath is not suggesting, however, that sexual relations are permitted and only marriage proscribed. Instead, he argues more perversely that the lovers should be able to 'endure the passion of love, withstand its fierce withering energy' without acting on their desires (12). He is aware that in using Ela's extraordinary beauty, he is making 'use of fire'. In fact, he revels in the possibilities that such conflagration makes available: 'That boy Atin, who has been drawn into our group by his love for Ela – there's dynamite enough in him to set off an explosion. That's why I'm so excited by him' (20). Atin has political potential *because* he has sexual ardour. In Indranath's vision, this sexual energy can be stoked, harnessed, and channelled into political action, a consciously wrought sublimation of erotic desire into political action.

Ela herself buys into this logic. At her first meeting with Atin, as she recalls, she was immediately attracted to him, but vowed that 'this precious being must be drawn closer, not just to me, but towards all of us'. She offers a rather muddled comparison – such collective possession is akin to the one Kunti unknowingly enjoins upon her five sons in the *Mahabharata* when she asks them to share whatever they have brought home (which turns out to be a wife, Draupadi). Ela's comparison appears to reverse the gender dynamic of the episode from the *Mahabharata*, for it is Atin who will be shared by all. However, Ela also declares that she, who has 'sworn [. . .] that I would keep nothing exclusively for myself' is also 'betrothed to the nation' (Tagore 34). Thus, she is also bride to the nation.

If Indranath has no use for Ela other than as a magnet for the boys who will carry out the real work of the revolution, Ela regards her 'ordinary self' as unequal to Atin's 'grandeur' and 'radiance'. This is when the novel lapses into tried and tested modes of gender distinction – Ela too believes that women are meant to be unequal. Women, she argues, 'have always been humiliated by Nature. We come into this world bearing the master plan of *biology* in our bodies'.[39] Recognizing such a burden, women learn to use 'the charmed weapons and spells of the material world. [. . .] Men on the other hand have to prove their excellence, their superiority, through dedication and striving. By a fortunate chance, I have come to know the nature of that superiority. Men are greater than we are'. And Atin agrees: 'Bigger in the head, yes!' (Tagore 41). Perhaps because in her childhood Ela was raised by an enlightened father and a mother steeped in tradition and ritual, or perhaps because Indranath has allowed her to think of her only role in the movement as one of deceiver, or perhaps because the books she has read have suggested 'that women are more skilled at it', Ela is convinced that women are born to practice deception. A degree of self-loathing propels her vision of an essential Indian femininity:

> I prayed in desperation that I may never again be born a woman. I have seen men with a woman's eyes and so I've been able to overcome everything and see the good in them. [. . .] When I think of the nation, I think of these boys. [. . .] If they make mistake, they are grand mistakes. [. . .] I am mother, sister and daughter to them. It makes my heart overflow. Westernized women will stop at calling themselves servitors but my entire being says I am one, a *sevika* (serving girl). In serving you, is my worth. In this devotion lies the consummation of our love.

Atin replies that her tenderness could be 'infinite' and not the cage that she suggests. Instead, he argues, it the nation, which 'has been invented by your group' that is 'a cage to my natural self' (46).

So, whereas Ela sees the nation as the crucible in which Atin's capacities can develop fully (in contrast to a relationship with her, which would limit him), Atin suggests that the opposite is the case. What we have here is a reversal of the dynamic presented in *Ghare Baire*, where the female protagonist imagines that *her* true potential could be realized only within the nationalist movement. What is similar in both novels, though, is that only a male protagonist (the husband Nikhil in *Ghare Baire* and Atin in *Char Adhyay*) can see through the hollowness and destructiveness of nationalist passion (represented in the former novel by the Swadeshi movement and in the latter by the revolutionaries). Whereas Nikhil, the consummate older humanist, remains consistently sceptical of Swadeshi, Atin is drawn into the movement by his love for Ela, and is therefore obliged to make a moral compromise with his own intelligence and morality.

Especially in these days of murderous hyper-nationalism, there is much to admire in Tagore's consistent critique of nationalist fervour, which is comparable to Frantz Fanon's later warnings about the 'pitfalls of nationalist consciousness'.[40] Both writers

warn against such devotion to an ideal of the nation as potentially harbouring sectarianism, chauvinism, and authoritarianism. In *Char Adhyay*, Atin tells Ela:

> I am not a *patriot* as you conceive of one. There is something bigger than *patriotism*. Those who do not accept it climb on the back of *patriotism* as a crocodile that they deem to be a boat to ferry them across. Deception, pettiness, mutual suspicion, conspiracies for power and spying will one day pull them down into cesspools. I see this clearly. [. . .] All over the world there are *nationalists* who have begun to announce in bestial voices the terrible lie that you may save the country only after you've killed its very spirit.
>
> (Tagore 79)

However, in both *Ghare Baire* and in this novel, what is disturbing about Tagore's critique is that it pivots around women who mistake the nation as the true object of their devotion, and who realize too late that their adoration and faith should have been directed at male figures (who are able to see the truth much earlier). Moreover, these men are not backward in their attitudes to women but represent a moderate, even Westernized modernity that will allow their wives and lovers to discard tradition while retaining their essential femininity and Indianness. Atin, after all, does not want the devoted service that Ela offers him; it is the revolutionary organization that is happy to use her, and to ingrain in her the idea of being a *sevika* to male nationalists. In these novels, it is ironically revolutionary movements that are flamboyant in their demands for unconditional love from these women.

In contrast, Atin, like Nikhil in *Ghare Baire*, is unable to demand or force affection, even as he states his own (self-less) desire: 'do not wait for me to beg anything of you. It's a boundless hunger but that doesn't make me a glutton; it's not in my nature. I cannot destroy the integrity of my desire' (Tagore 72). Ela must realize that her love for him should not consist of sharing him with the nation. But when she does, and begs him to marry her, he says he cannot, for he has already lost his own integrity by becoming part of the organization, by obeying its orders, including killing and looting for it: 'where dharma itself has been destroyed, I cannot make you a companion' (80). The novel ends by suggesting that Atin is finally compelled to kill Ela. He says that he has been ordered to do so by 'your once nationalist-brothers', who feel she knows too much and may reveal all to the police after her imminent arrest. But for her such a death is the only way to keep faith with him, particularly because one of their comrades who has turned informer has hinted that he will save her from the police if she marries him. She has already rejected him, but when Atin kills her, the implication is that he is in fact saving her from this predatory figure within the organization.

Although Ela is the central character of the novel – Ashis Nandy rightly identifies her 'choice' as the structural centre of the book – the fact is that she has no choice at all (Nandy 22–26). It is foreclosed from the beginning of the book, and all four chapters only develop her slow realization of her mistake. In his response to critiques of the novel, Tagore chose to concentrate on the figure of Atin: 'There is a doubly tragic

aspect to Atin's character: one, that he did not have Ela; and the other, that he had swerved from the trajectory of his own *swabhava*, the realization of his inherent self' (Tagore 145). The first edition of the novel had carried a 'pre-text' entitled *Abhash*, which claimed that Tagore had come to write the story upon watching, with much distress, as his friend and 'chief helpmate' at Santiniketan, Brahmanand Upadhyay, turned towards revolutionary politics. Many years later, Tagore writes, Upadhyay visited him and confessed: 'Robi-babu, I have greatly fallen' (137–39). Real-life *women* are nowhere mentioned in either the pre-text or the response, and Ela seems not to have been crafted from any overt engagement with the young revolutionary women in Bengal. It is not as though Tagore had no interaction with these women. In the years before he wrote *Char Adhyay*, he had been deeply unsettled by their large-scale participation in revolutionary politics and their active espousal of violence, but had nevertheless been willing to intercede with the authorities after their arrests (Dutt, *Chittagong* 81–82).

Char Adhyay's critique of revolutionary groups turns existing notions of revolutionary sexual mores upside down: by featuring revolutionary women as sexual pawns, Tagore can portray them as women who were misled, rather than as agents who *chose* their revolutionary agenda. The novel thereby confirms a conventional understanding of gender identities and roles, rendering revolutionary passions monstrous, but redeeming the women who espoused them.

*

Both *Pather Dabi*, which creates the romance of revolution, and *Char Adhyay*, which seeks to deflate it, feature revolutionary women whose political imaginations and affective lives are anchored by the men in their lives. But real-life revolutionary women, as I have shown, attempted to range further, destabilizing the dominant images of them as misled innocents, fallen women, or quasi-satis. Writing in the 1990s, Geraldine Forbes estimated that by 1933, about 40 of the 'between sixty and seventy women who had aided revolutionary groups' had been arrested. Her cautionary note – that such numbers are not precise, because the secret nature of such women's activities make them hard to identify – was prescient. In January of 2014, a new report reckoned that over 173 such women were jailed by the British authorities in Bengal. These numbers – derived from conviction records – are not only revised constantly as new information comes to light, but also cannot reflect the presence of larger support for the movement, or covert help offered by many.[41] Revolutionary ideals and passions animated many more women than we tend to imagine, and in ways more diverse than we have given them credit for.

The impact of the revolutionary groups on the political imaginary in India makes us forget that the period in which they were really active was so short, barely a decade. Moreover, the fame and appeal of revolutionaries – including women – was not just regional. To take just one example, Bina Das's confessional statement circulated in the United Provinces in Hindi translation. A pamphlet brought out by one S. P. Pandey, and proscribed by the British, suggested that her action was to arouse her

countrymen and women from their 'shameful impotence'; it goes on to deride 'those aged men who scream "Ahimsa, Ahimsa"'and to extol the examples of the movements for freedom in Russia, Ireland, and America.[42] It ends by invoking Bhagat Singh, Chandrashekhar Azad, Shanti Ghosh, and Suniti Chowdhury, and the cry of 'Long Live Revolution.'[43] In this pamphlet, the Bengali women rub shoulders with the more socialist men of the HSRA, all icons of a youthful and virile anti-colonial militancy.

In 1928, revolutionary groups from Bengal, Bihar, and Punjab met in Ferozeshah Kotla in Delhi to explore the possibilities of working together; although they could not unite, and although they differed substantially in their understandings of revolution, they shared key assumptions about revolutionary culture and the ideal revolutionary as dedicated and ascetic men. However, as I have explored here, the presence and activities of revolutionary women pushed against this culture. The next chapter considers how they provoked a grave crisis within one revolutionary group and thereby catalysed a rethinking of underground militancy itself.

Notes

1 Director, Intelligence Bureau, Home Department, Weekly Report 11 February 1932. India Office, LPJ12391, 20.
2 I am indebted to Sarkar's essay throughout this chapter.
3 Das's memoirs were first published in Bengali as *Shrinkhal Jhankar* in 1947. She died in 1997.
4 The novel had been serialized in the monthly journal *Bangabani* between February 1922 and May 1926.
5 British intelligence noted that many teachers were not just sympathetic to nationalist sentiments but nurtured such sentiments in their students.
6 This influence is discussed by Forbes (3, 7, 15 n. 35) and Sarkar ('Nationalism' 452).
7 The irony is that Surya Sen was later betrayed by a man in whose house he was hiding.
8 Further references to *Pather Dabi* will be cited in the text as *PD*.
9 See Sinha.
10 On Roy's early life, see Chattopadhyay.
11 Burmese revolutionaries often exhorted their compatriots to action by evoking the sacrifice of Indian 'young men [who] are collecting arms and bombs to free their Mother land from the grip of the bloody British Rule'. Maung Po Sein, President of Republican Society Burma issued a call to revolution in a leaflet entitled 'Are We Dogs?' that was proscribed by the British government, British Library, EPP 1/43, PIB 7/8. See also Sarkar, 'Nationalism' (453). For a detailed account of Burmese revolutionaries, see Williamson (67–75).
12 Although Sumitra's striking appearance may remind us of the 'glowing, incomparable beauty' of Shanti in *Anand Math*, there is a crucial difference between them. Shanti wears rags and eats little, whereas Sumitra wears gold and silk. This also makes her distinct from her own comrades – especially Bharati, who is very simply clad, and Sabyasachi, who seems to live in squalor.
13 For example, in 1919, at a women's meeting in Bombay, Gandhi asserted, 'If women do not share in men's tasks the country is bound to remain in a wretched state' (29).
14 See, for example, Kishwar.
15 The first idea is quoted in Edwards. The second is quoted in Bhatia.
16 The Doctor's room has 'no ventilation, nor any light. The whole place stank from the foul water which had accumulated in the neighbourhood. The floor was made up of wooden planks which had become so old and rotten than one was afraid to step on it lest it should break and fall down' (*PD* 153). Bharati tells Apurba: 'Sleep or no sleep [. . .] nothing seems

to matter to him. [. . .] Comfort and illness [. . .] he seems to have renounced both. You can't compare him with any other man'.

17 This is why Sumitra is far from being Sabyasachi's counterpart – a claim made by several scholars.
18 Hindu wives were often given new first names after marriage.
19 On these claims, see Loomba, 'Racism in India.'
20 It is also worth drawing attention to the Hinduized idiom of this deification, despite the fact that Bharati is a Christian.
21 The one exception is the question of untouchability, of which the novel is consistently critical. Sarkar suggests that the 'model of work celebrated' in *Pather Dabi* approximated most closely the cult of militant youth power that surrounded Subhas Chander Bose ('Nationalism' 452). In that case, it is remarkable that there seem to be precious few young people in the novel, apart from Bharati and Apurba, neither of whom is militant.
22 At this point in the novel, Sabyasachi indicates that he will undertake the union work he had disdained earlier (but he gives no reasons). In this regard, Sabyasachi models a transition that other members of the revolutionary underground did in fact make.
23 While Bankimchandra's novels do feature women as leaders and icons of the nationalist movement, they are set in historically distant times, do not engage directly with contemporary political debates, and are markedly Hindu in their vision of the nation. Nevertheless, these novels also continued to be inspirational to young women.
24 See Sarkar, 'Many Faces of Love'.
25 Ananta Lal Singh later founded a far-left group known as the Revolutionary Communist Council of India.
26 Chattri Sangh was set up in 1928 by Kamala herself, along with Kalyani Das and Surama Mitra, and it became 'a feeder organization' for the revolutionary movement (Forbes, 'Goddesses 5).
27 For a detailed account of the uprising, see Manini Chatterjee.
28 Weekly Report, Director, Intelligence Bureau, Home Department, 17 December 1931. India Office LPJ1239, 4-5.
29 The latter idea was reiterated endlessly in literature, culture at large, and political writing specifically, as well as almost endlessly in commentaries on Indian nationalism.
30 This statement is cited partially (with the passage I have quoted deleted) in Kumar (91). See also Ghosh.
31 This is ironic considering, as Laushey points out, that women began to join the revolutionary groups in the 1920s well before they were active in Gandhi's movement (44).
32 I am indebted to Sarmistha Dutta Gupta for this observation and for her insights about women revolutionaries in general. After I had written this chapter, I came across her essay 'Death and Desire in Times of Revolution,' which dovetails with many of my own arguments.
33 Contemporary films depicting the Chittagong rebels also transform her into Nirmal's lover, finding it hard to project a single woman with no love interest as a central character. Ashutosh Gowarikar's 2010 *Khelein Hum Jee Jaan Sey* (We Play with Life and Death) is based on Manini Chatterjee's *Do and Die* but reduces the detailed and nuanced book into a jingoistic farce. Bedabrata Pain's more sophisticated but ultimately pedestrian *Chittagong* (2012) keeps a greater distance between Pritilata and Nirmal Sen, whereas Gowarikar turns her into practically a good Hindu wife.
34 I am grateful to Tanika Sarkar for this reference and translation.
35 Mukherjee's 'Scaling the Barrier' is a welcome exception that highlights the trauma of women on the run.
36 Purnima Bose offers a far more supple reading of this event in *Organizing Empire* (20–25).
37 For a different take on the relationship between the revolutionaries and the script of widow immolation, see Saha.
38 Quoted in Rimli Bhattacharya's introduction to *Char Adhyay* (ix). Saroj Acharya was one of the inmates at the Deoli Internment Camp, where many of the Chittagong Armoury Raiders were detained.

39 The word 'biology' is italicised to indicate that Tagore used it in English.
40 'The Pitfalls of Nationalist Consciousness' is the third chapter of Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of The Earth*, first published in French in 1961.
41 'The unsung heroines of freedom movement from Kolkata,' *The Times of India*, January 13, 2014.
42 These movements were all deeply influential in India. See Sharma, *Easter Rebellion* (265– 67).
43 Bina Das, 'My Objective,' British Library India Office, Proscribed Indian Books, PIB 9–3.

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2

LOVE IN THE TIME OF REVOLUTION

When, in October 1930, Bhagat Singh and his comrades were sentenced to death for having shot a British police office two years earlier, young women were proactive in organizing some of the protests that erupted all over the country. Bhagat Singh's organization, the Hindustan Republican Socialist Army (HRSA), had been founded by Sachindranath Sanyal in 1923 as the Hindustan Republican Army (HRA), which believed that 'an organised and armed revolution' was the best way to establish a free India based on 'universal suffrage and the abolition of all systems which make the exploitation of man by man possible'. Unlike other Bengali revolutionary groups, the HRA was neither overtly Hindu nor, in the narrow sense, nationalist. Its manifesto, 'The Revolutionary', declared that 'the revolutionary party is not national but international in the sense that its ultimate object is to bring harmony in the world' (Verma, 'Development' 22). It also differed from the Bengali groups in their attitude to terrorism, announcing that

> Indian revolutionaries are neither terrorists, nor anarchists. They never aim at spreading anarchy in the land, and therefore they can never properly be called anarchists. Terrorism is never their object and they cannot be called terrorists. They do not believe that terrorism alone can bring independence and they do not want terrorism for terrorism's sake, although they may at times resort to this method as a very effective means of retaliation.
>
> (quoted in Hale 192)

Contrast this with the extract from a pamphlet of the Indian Republican Army, Chittagong Branch that it

> hereby declares today the lives of all Englishmen and white-skinned Anglo-Indians who are prejudicial to the interest of Indian freedom, forfeited to it.

> It also entreats all the members of the Indian Republican Army and the people of Chittagong to begin a vigorous campaign of murdering these people wherever found to avenge the murders of their forefathers and thus to relieve the country of the pernicious exploitations which they are doing in this land of OURS.
> (Hale 215)

By 1928, the HRA had added 'socialist' to its name. All its members were inspired by the October Revolution in Russia, although at that time most of them knew little about Marxism. As one of the comrades put it, 'we had accepted socialism in theory; in practice, the hangover of the past was still there' (Hale 22). The Communist Party had been formed some years earlier and some of the HSRA members, including Bhagat Singh, had contact with individual communists such as Sohan Singh Josh; they were to immerse themselves in Marxist study in the coming years. In the eyes of the British, however, they were already tainted with Bolshevik ideas. Bhagat Singh's radical youth organization the Lahore Naujawan Sabha was for them 'only a cloak for the secret propaganda of extreme political doctrines of communism and violence' (quoted in Josh 13).[1]

The HSRA had been bitterly condemned by Gandhi, but like the groups in Bengal, it had captured the imagination of many of his followers, even those who disagreed with its modus operandi.[2] In part it was precisely the revolutionaries' methods which generated this popularity; that is why Bhagat Singh had argued within the group that he should be the one to throw a bomb in the Central Legislative Assembly in Delhi, although the action was no simple act of derring-do, but a considered protest against anti-labour legislation and the arrest of labour leaders (Singh and Dutt). Over the next decade, even as they increasingly engaged with communist ideology and trade union activities, many young revolutionaries were slow to give up their commitment to spectacular action – a subject to which this chapter will return.

During this period too, women's political participation in all sorts of nationalist activities also increased drastically. In Lahore, where Bhagat Singh was lodged in Central Jail, Manmohini Zutshi (later Sahgal), a young Congress activist, posted women pickets in three colleges to protest the death sentence. Manmohini hailed from an upper-class nationalist family related to the Nehrus, and she, along with her mother and sisters, was to spend considerable time in British jails. Marriage, for most such women, would not halt their political activities or disrupt filial relations. But for others, political participation required extended domestic negotiations, even when husbands were sympathetic to the nationalist movement. Manmohini herself later recalled that when a Congress activist woman was arrested,

> Her husband [. . .] was incensed. He did not come to the trial and openly showed his displeasure. He even sent a message to his wife that after her release she could not come home. The poor woman was greatly upset. When Mother heard about this, she sent some Congress workers to see him and explain to him what a great honour it was for him and other members of his family to have his

> wife in prison. He replied that he was well aware of the honour and was very proud of his wife, but he was expressing his displeasure because she had left the house without his permission. Had he been asked he would have been only too happy to let her go. After all, it was with his permission that she had had her name registered on the roster of volunteers at the District Congress office.
>
> (Sahgal 77; quoted in Forbes 121)

Revolutionary women faced even more hurdles and often had to displease or leave their families to join the movement, in contrast to most Congress women, who usually worked with familial sanction (Mandal 136). Frequently, women in revolutionary organizations were never admitted back into the family fold.[3]

Kamala Dasgupta, who belonged to a 'middle class family of Bid Gaon, a village in Vikrampur in the district of Dacca' wanted to join Gandhiji's ashram, but after Gandhi insisted that she get her parents' permission – she 'had not the courage to approach them' – she turned towards the revolutionary group Jugantar, at least partly, one presumes, because it did not expect parental permission (2). Kamala's rebellion escalated when she found that her father had started looking for a match for her:

> My parents could not understand how their quiet and mild looking daughter had, all of a sudden, become disobedient, and stiff. On her side, the daughter prayed to God that the wounded feelings of her parents should not make her stray from the path of duty she had elected to follow. Revolutionary boys and girls of those days had reasons to know how it felt to disobey and cruelly disappoint their innocent parents. [. . .] I did not fit in again in our home.
>
> (7)

Even though Lahore was culturally a different world from Calcutta, young Lahori women also faced similar obstacles. Plans for an arranged marriage brought things to a head for Prakashvati Kapur, a 17-year-old girl who had met Manmohini Zutshi, and become a volunteer in the Congress Party. Unlike Kamala, Prakashvati had turned towards the militant underground for ideological reasons. Her parents had no objections to her working for the Congress. Although she recalled that 'there was no absolute distinction between the Congress and the revolutionaries at that time', there was no question of joining the later with parental approval. In this chapter, I will focus on Prakashvati's life and adventures with the HSRA, as her experiences allow us to see clearly the combination of sexual threat and disruptive potential women represented as they joined revolutionary organizations. They were invited to join because they served crucial logistical functions in such organizations, but their presence was perceived to threaten the male solidarity that was the foundation of all clandestine and violent activism.

After Bhagat Singh was arrested, and it became known that the revolutionaries were short of money, Prakashvati had started sending money to them, often stealing from her mother to do so. She also sent clothes, and even, on one occasion, her gold chain. When she sent a thousand rupees through a friend's brother, he brought back a

message that 'the revolutionaries wanted women to work with them, because otherwise they have a problem finding a place to stay or use as a base. They needed girls as a "cover" but also to work with them' (1987: 12). Prakashvati agreed, without knowing exactly what lay ahead. She had a brief meeting with HSRA leader Yashpal, during which, she recalls, she was so nervous that she didn't even look up at him, claiming that she would not have even recognized him had she met him after that. As I will go on to detail, this was the beginning of a controversial relationship that rocked the HSRA, arguably catalysing the break-up of the party.

As I showed in the previous chapter, revolutionary groups in Bengal became increasingly anxious about the erosion of their organizational discipline and ethos as women began to join them. There, Aurobindo Ghosh had expelled Jatin Banerjee from Jugantar on the charge having a relationship with a woman (Bandopadhyay 31).[4] The same male fears extended across revolutionary groups elsewhere. In Lucknow, in the late 1920s, an HSRA revolutionary named Apte had been shot for having a relationship with the wife of a Party sympathizer (Yashpal, *Simhavalokan* 256). And in 1930, Chandrashekhar Azad was to order that Yashpal be put to death for his relationship with Prakashvati. The most extensive discussion of this event is Yashpal's autobiography, *Simhavalokan* (A Hero Looks Back), which was published in three volumes in the early 1950s.[5] Prakashvati offered her own version, in interviews and in *Lahore Se Lukhnow Tak* (From Lahore to Lucknow), a memoir published in 1994. Long before he penned his autobiography, Yashpal also used these experiences to frame his novel *Dada Kamred* (Brother Comrade) which meditates upon the place of desire within revolutionary organizations. Various other HSRA comrades touched upon the incident, in written or oral testimonies. In this chapter I will show how these and other representations of the episode illuminate the webbed relations between sexual and revolutionary politics, both within militant organizations and in public culture at large.

But before I do so, I want to discuss a small Hindi booklet titled 'Khaddar Posh Athva Kranti Ki Jai' (Khadi-clad Or Victory to the Revolution), authored by one 'Pran', and published in Agra in 1930 – the same year Bhagat Singh was condemned by the colonial government, and Yashpal by his comrades. Banned immediately, the pamphlet extols the activities of a revolutionary group like the HSRA. The booklet is printed poorly, written in a patchy mixture of drama-like dialogue and descriptive narrative, and is highly formulaic (indeed, in reading it one might see where Bombay cinema derives some of its stock images of patriots). Nevertheless, what makes it interesting for us in the context of the Prakashvati episode is that its depiction of the group pivots on the romance between a young woman named 'Kranti' (Revolution) and a young man, Ramesh, whom she inducts into the organization.

The booklet opens by telling us 'everywhere there is revolution in the air'.[6] Ramesh pensively hums a plea to the nation as mother, asking her to give him the power to fight to remove her shackles. A young woman appears, promising him that his wishes will be fulfilled if he decides to sacrifice everything to the cause. Ramesh instantly knows that if the nation had many such women it would be a 'heaven'. She invites him to appear at a particular location that evening, and they part with the

revolutionary salutation 'Bande'.[7] Love too is instantaneous, for when 'they separate their hearts are broken in pieces.' It turns out that Kranti has a rich father, who has been conferred with the title 'Rai Bahadur' by the British because he supplied many soldiers from his lands for their 'German war' (the phrase is used in English). Kranti rejects her father's name for her, 'Kanti' ('light'), avowing that she was born not to spread 'fake light' but to bring about 'Kranti' or revolution; we are told that this is a term that 'burns' her father's heart to cinders (Pran 5). When she informs her father that she has met a young man impatient to free the country, he is appalled, for he has plans for her to marry a rich man. Insisting that she will only marry when she finds a man she wants or when the country is free, Kranti retires in a flood of tears; she counts the minutes till she can meet Ramesh again. That same evening, Ramesh is inducted into a secret organization that, he learns, has recently murdered the British superintendent of police. He passes their test of his ability and commitment, whereupon he is asked to sign a 'Bloody Register', a book all new recruits must sign in blood. Their signature attests that if they break the faith, the leader of the organization will have the right to shoot them to death.

Kranti now takes the initiative and asks Ramesh if he is married, whereupon he reveals that he promised his dying mother that he would live to serve the nation and marry a girl who was not only similarly dedicated but also from a poor home: for, as he puts it, 'those who live in luxury, forget everything' (25). Kranti asks, none too subtly, 'what if the girl is equally enraptured by the idea of freedom but rich?' She bursts out crying when he replies that to marry such a woman would amount to reneging on his promise, confessing that she has wanted him ever since she saw him in the park. She knows that these are not their 'days of ease', but she now considers him her husband. She agrees with him that neither of them is likely to stay alive long, as they are involved in dangerous missions, but all she wants to know is that he loves her. Of course, he does, and Kranti is at peace, for now all she wants is to see him every day.

Meanwhile, the police are swarming everywhere; they are, ostensibly, hunting for the superintendent's killer, but someone speculates that they have been asked to shoot everyone dressed in khaddar. Indeed, sometime later, we learn that the police have stopped a Gandhian procession, for it is unlawful under British law. Hasan Ali, the 'commander' of the procession, avows that it will proceed, and sits down in the street in an act of passive resistance; Kayamat Ali, the police officer in charge, brutally flogs him.[8] A young man then emerges suddenly from the crowd, warning Kayamat Ali that a 'Bloody Notice' has been served upon the authorities; an instant later Kayamat Ali has been shot dead. The 'Bloody Notice', which is now taken to the British Collector, warns the government that if it 'hurts the unarmed public or represses Mahatma Gandhi's peaceful movement, then your own death will be imminent' (30). The pamphlet contains many such melodramatic events, all of which bear witness to the power of revolutionary ideology. The revolutionaries proclaim their philosophy rousingly from their hideouts, telling their countrymen that the British 'promised us so many things in the German war but gave us Jallianwalla Bagh in return, and executed our unarmed brothers. [. . .] Our aim is not to kill our brothers but to destroy this government and whoever comes in our way will be executed' (19). Their arguments

inspire the Indian policemen, who then refuse to carry out the orders of their drunk British officer, engaging him in dialogue about the morality of the freedom struggle. They also variously kill a British collector and rescue the young men who are falsely implicated in this murder. These young men then join their ranks, and eventually we are told that people in cities and villages are also inspired to rise in revolt. By the end of the story, Ramesh has emerged as one of the leaders of the organization; he plans its spread in Punjab, United Provinces, and Bengal, the three parts of the country where the HSRA operated as well. Surendra, one of the other key leaders, agrees with Ramesh's views, and says that he now only wants to give his adoptive sister Kranti's hand to Ramesh. Thus Kranti, the fiercely active young woman who reached out to Ramesh politically and romantically, is rendered a sister, to be bestowed by one man upon another.

Two features of 'Khaddar Posh' are particularly significant. First, there are surprising episodes where armed revolutionaries (who are explicitly socialist and want to establish a 'revolutionary republic' modelled after Russia) become the guardians of the Gandhian movement. Unlike the HSRA's public mocking of Gandhi, 'Khaddar Posh' appropriates Gandhianism ('khaddar' or khadi was already associated with him) at the same time as it suggests that this doctrine requires revolutionary tactics and ideology to be genuinely effective. The bravery and daring of the comrades wins over the general public as well as Indians serving in the British police and administration. Second, the depiction of Kranti and Ramesh offsets contemporary anxieties about female revolutionaries. If groups like the HSRA were divided about the role of women in the organization and uneasy about their relationships with men, 'Khaddar Posh' erases all signs of these divisions and tensions. By the end, Kranti's break with her father seems complete and Ramesh's qualms about her wealth seem also to have disappeared. Most significantly the group desires and sanctions the union – no one seems worried that the marriage will deflect the pair from their revolutionary path.

Written to garner public support for the revolutionary cause, 'Khaddar Posh' suggests the attraction of a revolutionary organization that can offer a place for runaway daughters, include these young women as active functionaries, and avow emotional involvement between its members, while also appropriating mainstream nationalism as its junior partner. I turn now to a real-life version of these events, which also bears witness to a rewriting of the ascetic code of revolutionary life.

*

Despite the furore it caused, and despite its long afterlives, the Prakashvati episode has been marginalized from extended scholarly considerations of the HSRA. Perhaps this is the case because Yashpal remains a very controversial figure who led a chequered life.[9] Along with Bhagat Singh and Bhagvati Charan Vohra, he was arguably the most well-read socialist within the HSRA, and after the death of Chandrashekhar Azad in 1931, was elected its commander-in-chief. After his release from prison, he moved closer ideologically to the Communist Party, although he eschewed direct involvement with any political party, becoming a prolific writer and one of the most important novelists writing in Hindi. In his understanding, the Azad-Prakashvati

incident was *the* key to thinking about the nature of revolutionary politics in India. But this interpretation is often taken less seriously than it should be because Yashpal was accused of being a British informer by Mathura Das Thakur, the brother of Yashpal's comrade Sukhdev who is revered as part of HSRA's martyred trinity: Bhagat Singh, Rajguru, and Sukhdev (Nayar 108, 152).

In his autobiography, Yashpal himself mentions the suspicion within the Party that, because of his love for Prakashvati, he would always shun danger, seek a stable life, and even, perhaps, be tempted to turn informer. But his recounting of such suspicions has been used as *evidence* that he was a traitor.[10] Some of his associates suggest that Yashpal used his rhetorical skill to represent the history of those turbulent years to his own advantage.[11] Charges and counter-charges of turning informer have been levied, not just at Yashpal, but also at several others within the HSRA: Bhagvati Charan Vohra, Virbhadra Tivari, Sukhdevraj, Kailashpati, and even Sukhdev.[12]

Due to the secret nature of revolutionary operations, it is difficult to accurately resurrect the history of revolutionaries in this period. As Kama MacLean reminds us, so much of what we know is based on oral testimonies, speculations, rumours, and memories, all of which can be as biased as the materials that are more readily accepted in traditional historiography, such as police and government records, official correspondence and newspaper reports.[13] Moreover, revolutionary organizations, as the previous chapter has shown, pivoted on the strength and charisma of their leaders. In the HSRA, as in other organizations, there were factions that were driven by personal histories, as well as political ambitions and divergent ideologies, that colour the oral testimonies and other materials available. As MacLean asks: 'if we are to regard one narrative from a source as reliable, is it incumbent upon us to accept all of what that source says?' This question is particularly pertinent when we approach Prakashvati's story, but reversing it, we might also ask, is it incumbent upon us to *disregard* all that a person says if we suspect some of her statements? It is hard to conclusively establish many of the facts comprising the frisson and friction between Prakashvati, Yashpal, and Azad; but what remains crucial, as I would like to show, is precisely how, to what ends, and to what effects different people represented its details.

In his autobiography, Yashpal writes that Prakashvati was a student of Premvati, his cousin, a young widow and teacher who helped the revolutionaries by keeping house for them, raising funds, and establishing the nucleus of an organization among young women and girls. In these numerous overlapping roles, Premvati was responsible for attracting many girls to the movement. As mentioned earlier, when Prakashvati learned that her parents were planning to arrange her marriage, she wrote to Yashpal saying that she wanted to leave her home and join the Party. Yashpal wrote back saying that, in that case, the Party would make some arrangements for her; but the letter was intercepted by her brother, turning the situation into a crisis. Prakashvati jumped on to a neighbouring roof and ran away, arriving at the house where some of the HSRA comrades lived. Yashpal admits he was caught unprepared, for 'No girl or woman had ever been in that house before that day. . .' (*Simhavalokan* 175).[14] Durga Vohra – wife of Bhagvati Charan Vohra, another Party leader, and herself active in the movement – did come to the house, but she was 'another matter. *She* had such

self-confidence that rather than anyone worry about her, she worried about everyone else' (175; emphasis added). Like Premvati, Durga Vohra was older; she was also married to a Party leader, and was therefore 'Bhabhi' (sister-in-law) to everyone. The young and pretty Prakashvati who had no other home or family, posed an altogether different problem.

Yashpal was not clear on how to handle the situation. He told Prakashvati that the Party had been caught unprepared, and interrogated her on her education, as well as the situation at her home.

> 'Look', I said sharply, 'if you are resisting a marriage you don't want, you have the Party's sympathy, but we can't help you. Our work is only with political struggle'. 'What do you mean?' Prakashvati asked, worried. 'What I mean is that if you left your home because you did not want to get married, we cannot make any arrangements for you. That's not our work'.
>
> (176)

He advised her to go home, but Prakashvati refused. She pointed out, in other words, that it was the revolutionaries who had underlined the importance of personal freedom. Yashpal backpedalled furiously: 'so then you should say you left home to work for the Party. In that case, we welcome you!' Feeling ashamed of trying to avoid the problem this young girl would pose for the Party, he apologized, upon which

> she hid her face in her *anchal* [border of a sari] and the tears began to pour. I thought suddenly, what if someone from the Party comes in and sees her weeping? What will he think? I tried to quieten her, but nothing I said worked. My initial presumptuousness and rudeness turned into guilt, and in a few days, *she became my 'weakness'*.
>
> (177; emphasis added)

Note the phrase Yashpal uses for indicating that he fell in love with her 'She became my "weakness".'

It was decided to send Prakashvati to a small house rented by the organization in Qila Gujjarsingh. She was asked to observe the comrades there and learn how to interact with them 'without inhibitions'; her underground name would be 'Kamala'. (Prakashvati herself gives this name as Sarala.) Yashpal writes that Durga Bhabi suggested that he marry Prakashvati – a suggestion he took badly. He lashed out in anger, for she had 'called attention to my desire, which I was trying to suppress' (179). A few days later, Prakashvati asked to be moved out of that house because of the 'offensive' attitude of two of her house-mates; she begged to be allowed to live where Yashpal did and refused to be deterred by his demurrals that he lived in cramped, dangerous quarters. In the course of the conversation that followed, Yashpal says, they obliquely confessed desire for one another – 'there weren't many words exchanged, but where there is emotion, not many are needed' (180).

This was a silent language. This attraction communicated itself through the eyes. 'We felt, perhaps we are made for each other. [. . .] Compared to me, Yashpal-ji was a well-read and mature person, and I was a childish fool. Our glances could not be hidden from those of our companions' (Pal, *Lahore* 20).[15] Although both describe the start of the affair using the vocabulary of love at first – or is it second? – sight, Prakashvati lingers on its miraculous nature: surely, she muses, the sayings 'marriages are made in heaven' and 'love at first sight' are both apt in their case. Surely, too, such attraction is something to celebrate: 'it feels good to love someone. It also feels good to talk about love, hear about it and read stories about it' (20). That night, Yashpal writes, he told Durga Bhabhi that she was right, and that he had, in effect, taken her advice; in confessing his feelings, he says he 'assured myself that I was not hiding anything, or doing anything inappropriate' (*Simhavalokan* 180). Prakashvati's account of this moment gives Durga Bhabhi a more active role: 'Recognizing the vulture-like looks of the comrades, and also assessing the passion of our first looks, Durga Bhabhi placed my hand in his. She sealed our relationship' (*Lahore* 20).

Yashpal is careful to emphasize that despite her ability to express desire, Prakashvati was appropriately bashful. In other words, she is a defiant but not deviant woman, just as he himself is an unconventional but principled man. Yashpal's account of himself shows him struggling with his own occasionally traditional masculinity. For instance, upon depositing Prakashvati at a safe house in Delhi, he recalls warning her that because the plan was to storm the jail where Bhagat Singh was lodged, they might not meet again, and that she might read about his death in the newspapers in a few days:

> I was ready for death, he writes, but didn't like leaving my new love. In that spirit when we parted I asked her, 'Will you remember me?' She answered with a bowed neck, 'I'll soon join you' I felt satisfied with that answer but later repented. [. . .] My feeling was somewhat like that of men who used to feel satisfied that after their deaths, their wives would become sati on their funeral pyres.
>
> (*Simhavalokan* 189)

Yashpal castigates himself for his conventionality; after all, his partner is a revolutionary woman who cannot be reduced to a sati, the regressive figure of wifely devotion.

Yashpal chooses not to dwell on Prakashvati's experiences with the other male comrades in the Qila Gujjarsing house where she is first placed, but she is far more explicit about Sukhdevraj's inappropriate behaviour. Amplifying her remark on the 'vulture-like looks' of the comrades, she writes that Sukhdevraj 'used to call me "Amazon" and hover around me like a honey-bee. When Bhagvati Charan recognized this, he took me to Delhi . . .' (*Lahore* 21).[16] The flip side of the ascetic code of the Party, she indicates, was that a young girl like herself was viewed by many of the men as fair game. If, on the one hand, Party comrades could think that sexual passion would dilute the political commitment of a hardened fighter like Yashpal, on the other hand, not surprisingly, many of them would view a young woman as nothing

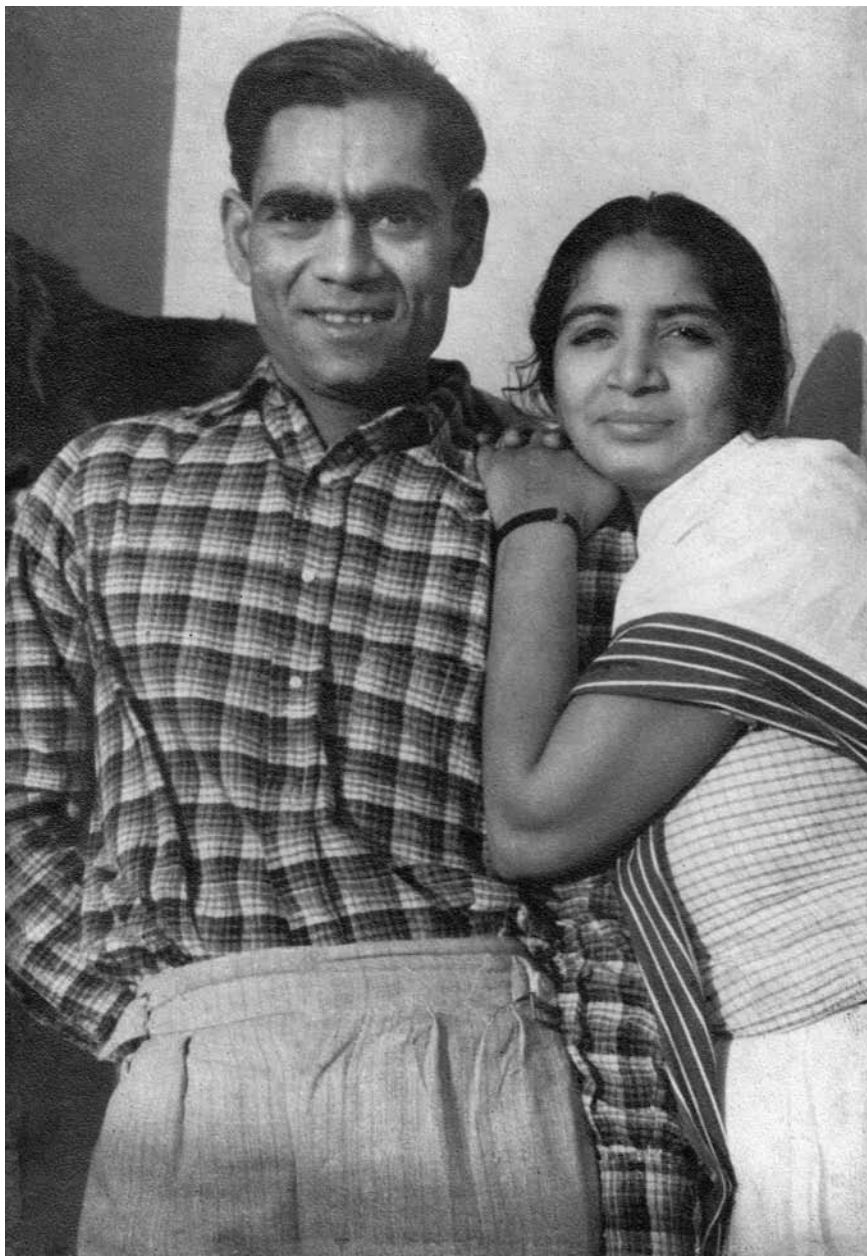

FIGURE 2.1 Prakashvati and Yashpal

(Courtesy: Anand)

but a sexual distraction, with no political will of her own. It is no wonder that Prakashvati is at pains to assert,

> Our main objective was to liberate the nation. Our attraction never came in the way of our goals, nor did it make us weak. For both of us our duty was the important thing. To free the nation came first, and our relationship came later. (22)

Yashpal and Prakashvati's accounts diverge in many small details. For example, according to Yashpal, it was he who took her to the house in Delhi, and not Bhagvati Charan. He notes that Bhagvati Charan had complained that Prakashvati had no idea of how to conduct herself so as to escape detection, and so was not the right person to help set up a house that would fool the police. He had also worried about the effect of the affair on Yashpal, and asked 'Will you be thinking of love or the work of the Party?' (Yashpal, *Simhavalokan* 191).[17] However, both Yashpal and Prakashvati agree that they only fell in love after she had moved into the revolutionary fold. Others suggested that the two had known each other for much longer. Yashpal notes that Durgadas Khanna asked him outright whether he had recruited Prakashvati because he loved her; her family, he said, were outraged and contemplating revenge against him (237).

While it is impossible to establish the exact sequence of events, or even the investments of all the participants in the drama, it is clear that the sexual relationship between Prakashvati and Yashpal was disturbing enough to both catalyse tensions within the group and transform the language in which these were expressed. Sukhdevraj, according to Vaishampayan, another member of the group, complained to Bhagvati Charan about 'the kind of goings-on between Yashpal and Prakashwati [*sic*] which left no scope of doubt that they were in fact leading the life of a couple' (Vaishampayan 123).[18] For his part, Yashpal distrusted Sukhdevraj politically, and writes that he told Azad that he didn't want him included in the plan to free Bhagat Singh from Lahore Central Jail. His autobiography describes in detail his worries that his actions would be interpreted in the light of this affair – if he was assigned a less dangerous role than others in the plan to free Bhagat Singh from jail, for example, it would be alleged that he had drawn back deliberately. Prakashvati herself suggests that it was men like Sukhdevraj who persuaded Chandrashekhar Azad that Yashpal's commitment to the cause had wavered. Yashpal asserts that Bhagvati Charan was convinced about his integrity but unfortunately, Bhagvati Charan died when a bomb detonated prematurely during explosives testing on the banks of the river Ravi; Yashpal suggests that this too was Sukhdevraj's fault, while Sukhdevraj blamed Yashpal (*Simhavalokan* 200).

These political tensions escalated over the next few months. In Delhi, on Azad's orders, Yashpal set up a bomb factory; Yashpal claims that after Bhagvati Charan's death, he was the only one who knew how to prepare the bomb 'masala' – picric acid, guncotton, dynamite, and nitroglycerine. The HSRA aimed 'to have the capacity to manufacture bombs in sufficient quantities so that we would not be limited to occasional terrorist acts but could operate as guerrilla squads' (*Simhavalokan* 216).

Yashpal paints a vivid picture of the Delhi factory, which he operated with Prakashvati and three others under the guise of a soap and cream manufacturing unit. Even though the house was airy, the picric acid fumes would, by evening, make the comrades sick, so that it was hard for them to eat anything; on occasion, they would head to a cheap hotel to dine in a clean atmosphere. They suffered from headaches and had to take horse-cart rides in the fresh air to recover. Kailashpati, a comrade whose job was to bring acid in carts felt that such behaviour was indulgent. Prakashvati's presence, however, was not seen to be proof of self-indulgent behaviour. For his part, Yashpal had earlier complained to Azad that it was Kailashpati who had taken to fancy attire and bourgeois ways.

One day, Kailashpati informed Yashpal that he had been summoned to Kanpur to appear before the Central Committee of the Party. Upon arriving in Kanpur, Yashpal couldn't meet the comrades assigned to meet him at the railway station, and since everyone was underground, he had no idea where the committee might be meeting. So he went to Virbhadra Tivari, the only other comrade whose hideout he knew. Yashpal describes the meeting in detail. He had a copy of Sarat Chandra's 1916 novel *Arrakhaniya* (The Unprotected) with him and Tivari played on the name of the novel to let him know that the Central Committee meeting for which Yashpal was summoned had in fact taken place. In that meeting, Yashpal had been accused of having become a coward, and of loving luxury too well. Therefore, it was conjectured, he might betray the Party. It was decided that Yashpal should be shot; Tivari warned him that someone would kill Prakashvati also.

Yashpal now needed to hide both from the police and from his own comrades. He was also in a quandary for 'now it was a question not of saving my life but my honour'. Did his comrades want him to redeem himself by shooting a police officer, he wondered? Suicide was tempting, but when he remembered his 'responsibility towards Prakashvati' it had to be ruled out. He decided to carefully contact various comrades so that he could put his version of events before them; it turned out that many knew of the order to eliminate him, but didn't know that he himself had already been warned. Some amplified the accusations against him. Durgadas Khanna said to him, 'You had said you respect her, but I have heard unsavoury things about her. Have you both gotten married?' Yashpal replied in the affirmative. Khanna then spelt out the charges against him:

> you have disgraced the organization by making Prakashvati run away from home to satisfy your own debauchery; to advance her status in the organization you wrongly accused Prem of losing two thousand rupees that she sent via him; you were jealous of Bhagvati Charan and knowingly made a poor bomb that would burst on being thrown. [. . .] You were against rescuing Bhagat Singh from jail because you wanted to save your life and run away with Prakash [*sic*]. Because of your behaviour, everyone suspects that you so desire to live in ease that any time you can go to the police and turn others in to save yourself.
>
> (*Simhavalokan* 239)

The idea that romantic or marital relationships would turn comrades into cowards was hardly new. Yashpal himself narrates the story of Phanindranath Ghosh, who married without telling the Party; the police traced him to the house of his parents in law and arrested him, whereupon he turned approver, contributing to the arrest of many other comrades.

In recounting the events of their shared story, Yashpal and Prakashvati are both anxious to present Azad as hot-headed, but neither dictatorial nor vindictive.[19] At the same time, Yashpal also presents him as deeply devoted to the ethos of the celibate revolutionary and therefore disturbed by Prakashvati's presence. He had, he insists, consulted Azad before recruiting Prakashvati. Azad had then agreed that the group needed women to set up homes for revolutionaries, but warned his comrades to 'think about it. A woman is the root of dissension' (*Simhavalokan* 137). In his telling, when Yashpal absconded, Azad showed up at the bomb factory. He harangued Prakashvati, demanded to know where Yashpal was, and inquired as to the nature of her relationship with him. Prakshvati replied, 'As it should be. What is it to you?' Yashpal imagines how angry this must have made Azad: 'not to have slapped her then was equivalent to being slapped himself!' (Prakashvati, from whom Yashpal would have learnt what transpired, does not detail this conversation.)

When Yashpal finally traced Azad in Kanpur, there was a showdown between the two. Upon being asked what Yashpal was being charged with, Azad retorted: 'what's your relationship with Kamala?' (247). Azad was furious when Yashpal replied 'that of husband and wife'. Azad was particularly angry because this was not Prakashvati's answer; in his view, she had insulted him. He told Yashpal: 'you people spread filth in the party. Who gave you permission to marry?' They argued furiously but ultimately reconciled, and Azad rescinded the decision of the Central Committee. Yashpal speculated that this was 'because he had sensed that many comrades were dissatisfied with it. [. . .] Azad had nothing of the dictator in him' (262). He even decided to accept Prakashvati as a full member, and virtually apologized to her. But it is clear that the episode was at least symptomatic, if not the cause, of deep dissension in the group, for Azad concluded that the group needed to be disbanded. He went so far as to distribute all the arms to the provincial organizers (treating Yashpal as one although he had been replaced as the head of the Punjab unit), asking them to work independently in different regions without being centrally coordinated.[20]

For Yashpal, what happened was an important indicator of the nature and functioning of revolutionary organizations. Upon talking to many of his comrades, he concludes that those who were displeased with him

> did not care at all about the other charges against me; in their eyes my one fault – taking Prakashvati as my wife – was enough to damn me. Because they believed that those who work for revolution should be wedded to the ideals of sacrifice and celibacy, they thought my behaviour was shameful.

Yashpal's meditation on such difficulties led him to believe that women and sexuality were at the core of a larger crisis in the revolutionary ethos:

> The attitudes of HSRA comrades towards love and women had changed a lot from that of earlier revolutionaries. These people did not view women as 'the gate to hell', or thinking or talking about women shameful or sinful. On the contrary, because of the oppression against women, they had a lot of sympathy towards them, and had begun to view them as objects of devotion. This attitude was like Roman Catholic celibates who imagine women as versions of the Virgin Mary, but imagine the larger caste of women as given to sin. They venerated love as elevating human beings but only in its abstract form was it seen as culturally appropriate – to have an actual relationship with a woman was a crime. I and some other comrades thought differently. We had accepted revolution as a way of life. In that path, we did not worry about natural needs as long as they didn't distract us.
>
> (*Simhavalokan* 256)

Although Yashpal refers to Prakashvati as his wife at the time, and both describe their own relationship in these early days as marital, they were formally married only years later, in 1936, when Yashpal was serving a 14-year prison sentence for his part in various incidents of armed rebellion against British authorities, including the attempt to blow up a train carrying the Viceroy Lord Irwin in 1929.[21] In jail, Yashpal was in poor health, on hunger strike, and wrote to Prakashvati to free her from their vow of commitment. She responded by petitioning the jail authorities to let them marry. Theirs was the first marriage to take place in an Indian prison. It was also unique – for it resulted in an outcry over the 'humanising of prison conditions' whereupon the British launched an investigation to discover who was to blame for the incident. The 'jail manual' was ultimately amended so that such marriages could not recur (Yashpal, *Yashpal Looks Back* 85–86).

Major Malhotra, Superintendent of Bareilly Central Jail, had been impressed by Prakashvati's decision to marry a man who still had a decade or more to spend in jail; Yashpal reports him as saying:

> It is not possible anywhere in the world to find such a quality of sacrifice and virtue other than in a Hindu woman. [. . .] what does she get out of marrying you? Hers is an extraordinary sacrifice for an ideal. If the Hindu religion and Hindustan are not dead now, it is because of the virtue and character of goddesses like her. It gives me great pleasure to know that I will have the opportunity to have a *darshan* of such a lady.
>
> (quoted in *Yashpal Looks Back* 84–85)

In this account, Malhotra was a nationalist at heart. Prakashvati's 'devotion' to Yashpal no doubt helped convince him that revolutionaries were also nationalist martyrs, and that their women maintained the ideals of Hindu womanhood.

But part of the problem was that all the revolutionaries themselves did not see Prakashvati in that way. Their complaint was precisely that she and Yashpal *behaved* like a couple, but were not in fact married. Clearly what disturbed them was that the relationship was sexual but not marital, nor romantic and celibate. There was, after all, no problem with the other married couple, Durga Bhabhi and Bhagvati Bhai, who were both central to the organization. And the couple's eventual marriage did mitigate their transgression in the eyes of some comrades. Manmath Nath Gupta, an HRA revolutionary, later reminisced about the incident in an interview:

> Now he and she [Yashpal and Prakashvati] stand justified, because later on they married. But suppose the affair had not ended in marriage and they had not become man and wife. Thus Azad was justified in giving the order to shoot Yashpal for his lapse. In some cases if the wife was herself a revolutionary, marriage would not become a source of weakness, but in other cases it might [. . .] if the wife herself is inspired, the whole thing becomes different. But suppose she were an ordinary woman, she may play into the hands of the enemy.
>
> (Gupta NMML 56)

In another interview, Gupta admits that:

> because of the good work done by Bhagvati Charan's wife, Bhabhi, and Susheelaji of Delhi (Bhagvati Charan's sister), girls began to be taken in into the Revolutionary Party. This was good, but, at the same time, this was also misused when the movement fell into the hands of the not-so-inspired and idealist type of young men. So that thing happened – decadence and all these things happened.
>
> (1974 24)

Elsewhere, Gupta claimed that 'Girls were seduced in the Party' and that the case of one such girl, 'called Ujjala, is discussed in famous Hindi poet Harivansh Rai Bachchan's autobiography' (Gupta, NMML 64).

I could locate no such incident in Bachchan's book. But what I did find was an extended narrative about Prakashvati, one which exemplifies how revolutionary women were viewed when they departed from the conventional script of wifedom. For this reason – and also because it concerns the years when Prakashvati was underground after Yashpal's arrest, but before their marriage in prison – the narrative is worth examining here.

*

Harivansh Rai Bachchan's contact with the revolutionaries was through his friend Shrikrishna Suri, who came from a liberal family and himself had sympathies with the underground anti-British movements. One day, writes Bachchan, Shrikrishna offered to introduce him to Prakashvati, whom the activists

> often mentioned. [. . .] It was said that she had broken off connection with her family; that she was beautiful and clever; that she worked with Yashpal; that she made bombs; that she was in love with Yashpal and planned to marry him; and that she was on the run, there being a warrant out for her arrest.
>
> (Bachchan, *Afternoon* 146)[22]

Yashpal being in prison, Shrikrishna had assumed the responsibility for looking after Prakashvati, much to the anger of his family because he could not even support himself. But Bachchan saw from 'the look in his eyes [. . .] that Shrikrishna was bound to Prakasho [*sic*] by more than dry duty' (146). Drawing attention to Shrikrishna's desire allows Bachchan to both express and deny his own attraction to Prakashvati.

At their first meeting, Bachchan writes, Prakashvati was 'dressed in a light green sari [. . .] sitting like a deserted lover'. Shrikrishna referred to Yashpal as 'Bhaiya' (brother), thereby establishing Prakashvati as his 'sister-in-law'. In Bachchan's words,

> this conveniently deflected the critical glance of a society intolerant of unauthorized relationships between young men and women. And the relationship between brother-in-law and sister-in-law is famously flexible in Indian society!
>
> (146)

Earlier in his own life, Bachchan had taken full advantage of such flexibility. His autobiography dwells on a triangulated relationship he claims to have shared with Karkal, his adoptive brother, and Karkal's young wife Champa. Upon first meeting Shrikrishna, he was strongly reminded of Karkal; and now, Prakashvati 'immediately brought Champa to mind', but whereas 'Champa's eyes had borne a look of innocence [. . .] Prakasho's were constantly watchful and alert' (147). Prakashvati is thus cast as both Shrikrishna's sister-in-law and as his own; but, in Bachchan's eyes, the libidinal possibilities of that relationship are enhanced, and indeed sanctioned, by Prakashvati's revolutionary past. For Bachchan, whereas women like Champa and his own wife Shyama are innocent and guileless in their allure, a revolutionary woman is knowingly sexual. Her agency and independence render her both available and culpable. Bachchan thus stakes a claim to his own unconventional sensibility (his triangulated relationship with Champa and Karkal) on the basis of his entirely conventional attitudes to women.

Bachchan returned to his home in Allahabad, where he lived with his parents; his ailing wife Shyama was at the time recuperating at her father's place nearby. But so powerful are his feelings for Shrikrishna and Prakashvati that he returns repeatedly to Delhi; the two provide the first audience for *Madhushala* (The Tavern or House of Wine), the poet's celebrated and important appropriation of the *Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam. Bachchan describes 'an increasing sense of belonging between us' which recreates for him 'the intoxication' and 'magic' he had experienced with Karkal and Champa. He is also 'not a little jealous at the fantasy world that he [Shrikrishna] had created for himself' (*Afternoon* 150). Some months later, Bachchan has the opportunity to create a parallel fantasy for himself. He reads newspaper reports that 'the

famous revolutionary activist Prakasho' had surrendered to the police, and had been released on the condition that she leave Delhi; these reports draw attention to 'Prakasho's attractive personality, the cut of her clothes, and her collyrium eye-make-up' (152).[23]

Shortly after, Prakashvati, or Rani (her underground name) arrives at Bachchan's doorstep, saying that Shrikrishna would join her in a week. But instead she lingers for months, Bachchan writes, assuming the duties of a daughter-in-law to the family – Bachchan begins to address her as 'Bhabhiji'. She waits with Bachchan's mother for him to return home from his duties as a schoolteacher before eating her dinner.[24] She ensures that the house is cleaned, his books are in order, and the lamps are lit at night: 'I was surprised to note that hands which made bombs could also be turned to such domesticity' (153). For Bachchan, Rani became his poetic muse, igniting his creativity and being transformed into the figure of Madhubala, or the wine-bearer in *Madhushala*, 'who lent brightness to a house darkened by grief and suffering' (153).

Bachchan describes their relationship as becoming increasingly erotic, largely at Rani's initiative:

> Being a revolutionary had taught her to live life as it came. She grew closer to me every day, taking me more and more into confidence. [. . .] If I grew closer and closer to Rani, it was her doing. Psychologists tell us that there is a woman within every man, just as there is a man within every woman; it seems to me that the woman within me is to the fore, and I am always heavily influenced by dominant women of strongly masculine character. If Rani was not such a woman, she could scarcely have worked alongside male activists. She drew closer to me and drew me closer to herself, reaching the point where society puts up danger signals. But only a woman is afraid of danger, not a man. I was afraid, not Rani.
>
> (154–55)[25]

Bachchan writes that Rani also wanted to step out in the evenings ('Punjabi girls have this urge as soon as its evening'); she asks him to take her shopping, which he cannot afford. He finds that 'to walk out publicly in the market area with a "femme fatale" such as Rani was to invite general vilification', but while he is apprehensive, she is 'blithely unconcerned' (155).

Eventually, Shrikrishna arrives and Bachchan watches in helpless jealousy as Rani turns back to him. Shrikrishna and Rani move in together to a house that is, nevertheless, paid for by Bachchan, and he realizes 'that their love for me was in direct proportion to the amount of money I could give them' (157). One day, Bachchan finds a suicide note from Shrikrishna and Rani announcing that they have gone to drown themselves in the river Jumna. Bachchan rushes after them, distraught, and collapses as he sees them emerging 'as their own ghosts'. In overwrought prose, he describes 'an anguish that wrung my heart dry' and then his breakdown. Asked by his wife what he would have done if the lovers had not returned, he replies, 'Then I would not have either [. . .]' (159). Shyama, ever understanding, swallows her tears.

Bachchan writes that while he is unable to describe his emotional state in this autobiographical account, he has done so at length in *Madhushala*: 'Bachchan the man never let Shrikrishna and Rani back into his life. . . . But as a poet I could never let them go, and shades of Shrikrishna and Rani linger in several of my poems' (159–60).

Both in public culture and in literary writing, politically active women were generally represented in one of two ways: either as desexualized (honorary males or mothers) or as highly sexualized, and thus as illicitly inviting male desire. In Bachchan's account, Prakashvati's very existence in politics had been coloured by the scandal of her liaison with Yashpal. Therefore, in his eyes, she is not just Yashpal's lover, but Shrikrishna's, and potentially, his own. Moreover, after Yashpal's arrest, Prakashvati had continued to live her life as political activist. Both roles had established, to Bachchan, that she had set aside social norms. Even as she played the housewife, she was also a maker of bombs as well as a sexually independent person. She is thus simultaneously a 'femme fatale', a seductress, and a masculine woman – hyper-feminine and yet not really feminine at all. He suggests, ultimately, that she needs to be mastered by a real man, which Shrikrishna, in his view, is not: he lacks 'masculinity' and therefore cannot be 'master of his own fate' (Bachchan, *Kya Bhooloon* 301; translation mine). When Rani eventually marries Yashpal, Bachchan makes an observation that suggests his lingering *schadenfreude*, her 'practical nature and capacity for work, repressed by contact with Shrikrishna's idle and fatalistic ways, blossomed again through association with the resolute and industrious Yashpal, the self-confident artist' (160).

Bachchan published his autobiography in 1969. It was not until 1994 that Prakashvati offered a counter-narrative in her own memoir, *Lahore Se Lucknow Tak* (From Lahore to Lucknow), challenging Bachchan's portrayal of her as a part-helpless, part-predatory woman in search of a lover. She describes her long association with Shrikrishna's sisters, and how she and Yashpal had stayed in the Suri household in Delhi, a space that was open to both Congress workers and the revolutionaries. After Yashpal's arrest, she lived with them for a month; and contrary to Bachchan's account, she inhabited no love-nest with Shrikrishna.

If Bachchan has a romantic crush, Prakashvati suggests, it is not on her, but rather on Shrikrishna. She describes how she witnessed the poet prostrating himself completely at Shrikrishna's feet, offering him a manuscript of poems, topped by a flower, 'exactly as some people place an offering before idols of gods in temples' (Pal, *Lahore* 51). Or, we might add, exactly as lover might gift his poetic offering to the adored one. Prakashvati writes that 'Bachchan worshipped Shrikrishna as a god', and she, being his 'bhabhi', also took on the status of a goddess. On the terrace of the Allahabad house, he would 'kiss her hand and forehead with intimacy, respect and devotion, carried away by sentimentality' (62). It is entirely possible, of course, that such fervour was not a spillover from Bachchan's sentiments for Shrikrishna. Prakashvati reproduces some of Bachchan's fevered love letters to Shrikrishna, where he does address the latter as 'my God', as well as a photograph of the three of them, with another friend, on the occasion of Shrikrishna's birthday in January 1935. Further, as a form of self-defence, she notes that in Allahabad, the Bachchan household included

Bachchan's younger sister Bitto, with whom Prakashvati shared a room, a detail that is missing in the poet's account, which implies that when his parents were abed, he and Prakashvati were free to be intimate with one another.

As Prakashvati puts it, when it comes to herself, Bachchan has given 'full license to his imagination' (*Lahore* 51). She takes particular exception to his description of her as either helpless (sitting like a 'deserted lover') or seeking male attention:

> Bachchan should know that I was an energetic girl. I wanted to shake the foundations of the British government. As soon as Yashpal-ji was arrested, I was chosen by the group's comrades as their leader. Leaflets published under my name challenged the British government. I was not sad at Yashpal-ji's arrest. All of us revolutionaries knew that we could also be caught by the police.
>
> (79)[26]

Bachchan's mention of her surrender is also erroneous (and perhaps malicious); Prakashvati reproduces newspaper reports of her arrest by an armed police party. As for Bachchan's contention that she wanted him to take her out to the bazaar, inviting scandal, Prakashvati notes that she had never felt the need for such assistance: 'I have been underground for many years. People who live by evading the police's gaze do not walk holding anybody's hand. I could live alone (and did). [. . .] Did I need to beg Bachchan to go till the market?' (79). Taking a dig at the title of Bachchan's autobiography, *Kya Bhoolon Kya Yad Karoon* (What Should I Remember, What Forget), Prakashvati writes, 'One has to commend his extraordinary ability to remember what he likes and forget what he wants. [. . .] He cannot forget all this [that she has detailed] whatever [else] he forgets or remembers' (70–73).

The Bachchan episode is but a small part of Prakashvati's memoir, but Prakashvati is the most assertive about her revolutionary agency when she discusses it and the Azad affair. As in the rest of the narrative, though, in these episodes too she presents herself as entirely devoted to Yashpal. Most of the book revolves around her domestic life and economic existence after the couple's activist period, and as well as their changing political views, including their sympathies with, and differences from, the Communist Party of India. Many of these details attest to the unglamorous side of their daily existence. Because she had left home very young, she had to continue her education while underground. Upon realizing that they would have no source of income after Yashpal was released, she started to train as a dentist, and would later work as one for many years. When they started a magazine, and later a progressive publishing house and printing press in Lucknow, she was the one who undertook much of the necessary fundraising activity.

These ventures were often fined, even shut down, with Yashpal often arrested for material that they had published. Prakashvati's memoir attests repeatedly to the material and logistical support offered, during her efforts to gain an education or make a living, by many ordinary and even apparently apolitical people who retained strong sympathies for the revolutionary cause. It may be disappointing for many readers that

so much of the narrative centres on her provision of support for Yashpal's career; at one point, she even declares, 'I had given Yashpal-ji freedom to pursue his literary work' (*Lahore* 111). Such support always required enormous energy and resourcefulness, it is true, and Prakashvati does not lose her ability to comment on the burden of existing gender norms on young women:

> Fifty years earlier, middle-class girls were not as free as they are today [. . .] the political atmosphere then certainly gave boys and girls the opportunity to work together but all that was possible only in upper class genteel society; otherwise for boys and girls to roam around independently was considered wayward. Despite these obstacles middle class girls and boys did jump into the freedom struggle. I know that at time a single young woman had to survive in society with much struggle. If she was to run around alone, there would be trouble; if she took someone with her, there would be trouble. I heard everything stoically, did not lose heart.
>
> (74)

But there is a shift in the narrative now and its focal point becomes more firmly the life of a couple, with herself in the supporting role. In her other writings, though, she continued to raise the question of gender asymmetry; in one article, she suggested that marriage is but a way for a man to signal his ownership of a woman, just as a collar around the neck signals a dog's being owned by someone (Pal, 'Kutte' 21).

*

I have suggested that in literary writing, in the utterances of male and female revolutionaries, and in public culture, sexual and political passion are variously understood as incompatible, as stand-ins for one another, and as mutually enabling, though only when nestled within a conjugal and faithful relationship. I have also noted that women challenged these bounds, even as they were circumscribed by them. For example, Durga Vohra, referred to as Bhabhi by all the other comrades including Yashpal and Prakashvati, was a revolutionary in her own right, although she is remembered mainly for posing as Bhagat Singh's wife as he fled from Punjab to Calcutta. When she did so, she acted on her own initiative, her husband being away at the time. When her husband later found out, Durga Vohra recalled that 'he was very happy. Then he complimented his wife; I have not recognised you until now; today I can understand that I have got a revolutionary wife' (quoted in Maclean, 'Durga Bhabhi' 181).[27] Durga Vohra affirmed that she remained active in politics even after her husband was killed while testing a bomb:

> I fled after that. I sent the boy [her young son] to someone else in Allahabad. There was a warrant against me so I threw myself fully into my work. I was not a born revolutionary, but one who becomes a revolutionary with the maturity of ideas. More and more an individual thinks, understands, reads and writes, his ideas

> change, they become stronger, it's not about being emotional. The first phase is emotional. And I believe that 99% of our comrades were those who had come from an emotional phase, educated themselves, and then became genuine revolutionaries. Of course there are exceptions, such as my husband. Such as Chandrashekhar Azad. I told Azad that I wanted my full share of revolutionary work.
>
> (quoted in Maclean, 'Durga Bhabhi' 182)

Reconstructing Durga Vohra's revolutionary life and continued participation in armed action, Kama MacLean suggests that the

> gendered roles ascribed to Durga Devi as a mother, wife and later a widow, gave her a unique disguise. The department of Indian Political Intelligence had connected 'the violence movement' with young, unencumbered, and energetic bachelors. Because this was largely true of inner circle members, the strategic use of the wives of married party members could lend subversive operations a sheen of respectability. Women were the perfect front.
>
> (quoted in Maclean, 'Durga Bhabhi' 183)

While it is absolutely true that women were used in this strategic way by the HSRA, the gendered divisions of labour were not merely a disguising of gender roles within the organization. For these were the *only* roles assigned to women, until women themselves insisted otherwise. Durga Bhabhi, according to Yashpal, had begun to regard all the comrades as brothers and brothers-in-law: 'She had accepted cooking and sending good food to those in jail as her revolutionary duty. Once she had to shoulder duty and responsibility, Durga Bhabhi's role as "Durga" became manifest' (*Simhavalokan* 19). Yashpal implies Durga Bhabhi accepted and made her own a role that was thrust upon her, but the formulation also contains a hint that Durga Bhabhi herself could have wanted to embody not just Durga as mother goddess, but also Durga the warrior. For those who had begun to view her as Durga, both aspects were apparent, as Uday Shankar Bhatt recounts:

> I had the opportunity to see *Durga* in Durga, the dauntless life partner in those testing times. During the last days that I observed her, she used to remain away from home for the whole nights so often and we, who were so close to them, had no idea as to where she remained and what she was doing. This made her a soft target of character assassination for the women around her. It could very well be said that both husband and wife were in a neck to neck race in the caravan of revolution to offer themselves as incense on the altar of the goddess of *Inquilab*.
>
> (quoted in Wariach 23–24)

Despite Durga Vohra's strength of personality and independence, it is not surprising that it was only after her husband's death that she refused to play the good mother. When told that she could not undertake dangerous activities because she had a young

son, she famously retorted that her son was the whole organization's responsibility – and insisted that she participate in the 'race' to revolution.

In 1932, British intelligence found an HSRA document that they attributed to Bhagat Singh. Titled 'Our Opportunity', this document was supposedly written during Bhagat Singh's last days in prison. It offered a Marxist account of the Indian situation, and a detailed outline for how a revolutionary party ought to be structured.[28] The document opens by rethinking terrorism:

> The cult of the bomb is as old as 1905 and it is a sad comment on Revolutionary India that they have not yet realised its use and misuse. Terrorism is a confession that the revolutionary mentality has not penetrated into the masses. It is thus a confession of our failure. In the initial stages it had its use, it shook the torpor out of the body politic, enkindled the imagination of the young intelligentsia, fired their spirit of self-sacrifice and demonstrated before the world and before our enemies the truth and strength of the movement. But by itself it is not enough.
>
> (48)

It goes on to acknowledge that Gandhianism, despite its political quietism, is revolutionary because it 'counts on mass action'. A 'secret military organization' can be a kind of 'firing line for a revolutionary party, but it must be backed up by a mobile and militant mass party' (49–51). The document lays out what is necessary to build a revolutionary organization. In each area, the revolutionary party should have a 'General Committee' in charge of recruitment, propaganda, general policy, organization and union work; a committee of finance; a 'Committee of Action', which would be a 'secret body for sabotage, collection of arms, training for insurrection' and lastly a 'Committee of Women':

> Though no artificial barrier is recognized between men and women, yet for the sake of convenience and safety of the party there should be such a body entirely responsible for its own members. They may be put in entire charge of the (b) F.C [Finance Committee] and of the considerable activities of the (a) G.C [General Committee]. Their scope on (c) [The Committee of Action] is very limited. Their primary duties will be to revolutionise the women folk and select from them active members for direct service.
>
> (56–57)

'Our Opportunity' divides the members of the Committee of Action into two categories – the first, 'Women and Juniors', and the second, 'Seniors'. Women and Juniors are to engage in espionage and intelligence, travel to Western countries to acquire arms and learn how to use them, and study government maps showing possible routes of action and shelters for Party members.

If this manifesto was indeed written by Bhagat Singh, it shows a distinct change from his own earlier attitudes and those of many of his comrades, particularly Azad,

both in its understanding of the political situation in general, and in according a place to women in its new conception of the revolutionary party (Maclean, *History* 84). It is also possible of course that someone else, including Yashpal, could have had a hand in drafting it.[29] Kama MacLean cites the document to support her argument that 'there was, by and large, no gendered agenda in the HSRA; initial reservations about women's participation gave way to a pragmatism aimed at meeting larger goals' (*History* 188). She also suggests that the entire Prakashvati episode owed much to the fraught relationship between Yashpal and Azad, rather than to larger attitudes concerning gender. In contrast, I hold that such a conclusion brushes away too easily the deep-rooted male attitudes to women, their sexuality and their capacity for revolutionary action. While it is right to insist that many revolutionaries, especially those who turned to Marxism, insisted on carving out a space for women's participation, it is also important to highlight that women claimed and created such spaces for themselves. It is thus not unreasonable to speculate that 'Our Opportunity' accords a place to women partly *because* of women like Prakashvati and Durga Vohra. We should also note, however, that the manifesto does not see men and women as equals, and nor does it address gender inequity as part of the revolutionary agenda.

I have suggested that women and men within the HSRA were grappling, both explicitly and more inchoately, with questions of gender difference at precisely the same time that they were grappling with the need for socialism, the use of violence as part of the anti-colonial and revolutionary credo, and concerns about the post-Independence future of India. Bhagat Singh and Yashpal, among others, were clearly moving towards an explicitly Marxist agenda. 'Our Opportunity', as a draft of a new party manifesto reveals a detailed consideration of the shape that should be taken by the revolutionary Party, and accords, for the first time and very briefly, a place to women within it. But the meaning of such presence, as well as the questions it might pose for a revolutionary agenda, were explored at length only by Yashpal – not in any manifesto, but in his novel *Dada Kamred* (1941), to which I now turn.

*

Dada Kamred revisits and transforms Prakashvati and Yashpal's traumatic history in the HSRA into an extraordinary meditation upon the necessary intersections of politics and sexuality, and a plea to rethink the very meaning of revolution in India. Nikhil Govind rightly suggests that Yashpal shares with his contemporaries Jainendra and Agyeya the 'heuristic use of sexuality as a horizon for asking larger questions about the general state of revolutionary nationalist freedom' (Govind 137). Here I want to push Govind's argument further and suggest that, in the case of Yashpal, sexuality is not only a heuristic device that helps diagnose revolution but a major concern in itself.

The novel is set in the 1930s, the decade at the start of which Yashpal was indicted for his relationship with Prakashvati. Its central character, Harish, is a version of Yashpal himself, and Dada (elder brother) is a barely disguised portrait of Azad.[30] Like the rest of Yashpal's *oeuvre*, it is an uncompromising critique of patriarchal attitudes

towards women, and an extended reflection on left-wing political action in colonial India. It suggests the impossibility of prizing apart two issues – one, the need for revolutionary organizations in India to transform themselves from sectarian, underground movements operating through violent and spectacular assaults on the British government into socialist organizations involving the large mass of workers; and two, the necessity for all revolutionary organizations to engage openly with the question of sexual desire and gender difference.

The first question was one that spoke directly to Yashpal's own belief at the time when he was writing, that the Communist Party was the only practical alternative both to the Congress and to organizations like the HSRA. The Communist Party in India was established in 1925, and banned across the country in 1934. From the late 1920s, workers' movements had spread all over the country; fearing the spread of the 'Bolshevik menace,' the colonial government sought to 'criminalize communism as a political belief' through various 'conspiracy cases.'[31] In 1929, the Meerut Conspiracy Case jailed 33 labour leaders from Calcutta, Bombay, United Provinces and Punjab, charging them with a conspiracy to establish a branch of the Comintern. The effect of the four-year-long case was to make the communists more visible and popular. Many of the revolutionaries, including Bhagat Singh, were influenced by these developments, but because it was hard to disseminate communist literature, their ideas changed slowly. Ironically, as Shiv Verma put it, 'it was only after our arrests that we got enough time and material to read, discuss, ponder over our past and come to correct conclusions' (Verma, 'Development' 55). In 1940 the Communist Party had called for general strikes as a means for advancing the onslaught against colonial rule. Communists had been building trade unions in many parts of the country, and had also brought women into them – indeed, as I discuss in Chapter 4, women were leading some of the unions and strike actions. Communists were far from giving up the idea of armed insurrection, but they had never been in favour of isolated actions. *Dada Kamred* foregrounds these debates and discussions.

But the second issue – that of sexual desire and gender difference – was, according to Yashpal, essential for *all* of these organizations to consider. By the early 1950s, Yashpal felt that the communists were handling the relationships between men and women 'realistically,' but in 1940–1941, when he wrote the novel, he had not actually observed any communist organizations. As a political and literary document, the book is unique not only because it brings together these two questions – of how to organize large numbers of people, and of how to incorporate personal and sexual freedoms into a revolutionary agenda – but also because it narrates them by featuring a radical young woman, Shailbala, as its central figure. If Harish's political evolution speaks to the first issue, it is Shail who, both explicitly and through her own desires and actions, shows why revolutionary thought and practice need to extend beyond the sphere of economic change, into the arenas of gender and familial relations, sexuality, intimacy, and ultimately personal freedom. Through its depiction of these characters' interactions, *Dada Kamred* does render a conventional situation, wherein devotion to a political cause is a passion that swallows all other desires, in particular sexual desire. But the novel goes onto ask whether the converse can also be true – that

is, whether sexual desire and liberation can also become a *replacement* for political action. In this respect, the novel is prescient in anticipating a question that would later become important in feminist and other movements.

Unlike Harish and Dada, Shail is not obviously modelled upon Prakashvati or any other historical figure, although Shakeel Siddiqui of the Lucknow PWA has suggested (in a personal communication) that she is based on the communist writer and doctor, Rashid Jehan. Shail's relationship with Harish provokes the same crisis in the Party that followed from Prakashvati and Yashpal's relationship, but the nature of their affair is radically different. They do not marry, and are barely even a couple, although they have a sexual relationship which results in Shail becoming pregnant and deciding to have the child. Through Shail's radical and freethinking spirit, Yashpal examines not only the place of women in political movements, but also social attitudes towards sexuality in general. Whether it was his experience within the HSRA, his strong-willed mother, or his own history that allowed Yashpal to consistently articulate the sexual with the political, *Dada Kamred* establishes the concern with female sexuality and independence that becomes central to all his fiction.

Dada Kamred opens not with Shail but Yashoda, a meek housewife in Lahore. Although her husband Amarnath is the secretary of the local Congress Committee, and Yashoda is 'enthused' by the large processions and meetings of the Party, the author comments that 'her entire world was restricted to maintaining the health of Amarnath Babu's body and their house' until her son Uday 'became the centre of her concern and thought. What else apart from this is an Indian woman's life?' (21).[32] This assumption holds true until Harish, a revolutionary fugitive, shows up one night at their house; terrified as she is, Yashoda shelters him because he arouses her motherly instincts:

> Despite having a pistol in his hand he was helplessly begging for her protection. Exactly as her own son Uday was helpless, and needed the help of his mother and grandmother. But this boy was several years older. Her own son was securely sleeping by his grandmother's side, but some other mother's son had come to her bosom [anchal] in his attempt to escape the jaws of death.
>
> (14)

After this experience, which she has not divulged to her husband, Yashoda starts tracking news of the revolutionaries.

A month later, Shail arrives at Yashoda's house, ostensibly to recruit her to the Congress Party, but actually to arrange another meeting between her and Harish. Shail herself is a supporter of his underground party, though she is not a formally a member. Even though Yashoda herself is not old-fashioned, she can see that Shail is a 'new type of woman [. . .] whose sari is of khaddar but the fashion of wearing it entirely new. The sleeves of the blouse stop at the shoulders, and she carries a large bag like European ladies do'. At the very first glance Yashoda feels both 'curiosity and attraction' towards her:

> Her clear, wheat-coloured, longish face had the tenderness and inexperience of youth, but her manner and way of speaking had an enthusiasm that invited

> intimacy. Her large eyes bespoke self-confidence. Her appearance did not have the kind of beauty that aroused agony, but a memorable attractiveness.
>
> (22)

Yashoda, with her female instinct, can understand that Shail's 'lack of shyness implies "fearlessness" rather than "shamelessness"'. Thus, the novel takes pains to establish, through the conventional Yashoda, that Shail's openness is not that of a socialite or a femme fatale. Shail brings two books for Yashoda to read: *Women of the World* and *Bandi Jeevan* (A Life of Captivity), a famous tract by Sachindra Nath Sanyal, founder of the HRA, who was jailed in the Andaman Islands after an unsuccessful attempt at organizing an anti-British Mutiny in 1915. The book had become a manifesto for young revolutionaries. When Yashoda reads these books, we are told that 'a new feeling arose in her heart. She began to experience a desire and an enthusiasm to do something, but there was no direction for her'. However, when a few days later 'Shailbala took her own home in her car, driving herself, Yashoda felt as if she was going towards a new world, as she felt after her wedding when she went to her in-law's place' (23).

Shail, an M.A. student and the daughter of Lala Dhyanchand, a well-known businessman, lives on affluent Nisbet Road. Like so many of the women who joined leftist anti-colonial struggles in Lahore, she comes from a wealthier and more liberal background than Prakashvati did. In Yashpal's later magnum opus *Saccha Jhooth*, the brother of a college-going but poorer girl points out that in Lahore, only the daughters of the highly-educated and well-to-do have the freedom to come and go as they please. Shail's father has given her this freedom, and, in spite of his increasing discomfort at her activities, he does not revoke it. Yashoda is introduced to this new world, and its different gender codes. She meets Harish again, who, learning that Yashoda has not divulged his nocturnal visit to her husband, advises her that there is no need to ever do so: 'a husband is God indeed, but there are scores of other gods as well. It's good to let each one stay in his own place' (24). Shail displays a relaxed and even flirtatious familiarity with Harish, but 'somehow Yashoda was not offended by this unusual behaviour which in ordinary terms could be called indecent' (7). She listens to Harish and Shail debate the best ways of propagating anti-colonial consciousness.

The two discuss whether or not revolutionary organizations should now change their methods, curtail secret and violent activities, and start working alongside legal organizations like the Congress. Shail observes that Dada and some other comrades think that such work would merely direct people toward the Congress's 'useless and showy movement [. . .] rather than towards the [revolutionary] Party' (25). Harish retorts that a secret movement cannot achieve anything. He tells Yashoda that their work entails an absolute commitment, 'such that one must abandon the love of everyone. Not just that of one's close associates, but even the love of one's companions' (26). When Harish orders Shail to drop Yashoda home, and Shail promptly obeys, Yashoda notes the way in which 'this proud and smart woman dances on his orders'. She wonders whether in the future Yashoda herself will have to do the same.

But Shail isn't simply Harish's obedient comrade. They debate the position of women in marriage, with Shail insisting that marriage is another form of slavery, and Harish suggesting that it can be companionate. But this is, for him, a theoretical supposition. For he is 'astonished' that Shail can 'take on the burden of revolution and at the same time dream of a love-life as well. You know my situation – to create a world of love and dreams is not in my destiny. . .' (31). As a friend, however, Harish encourages Shail to talk about her previous relationships. She confesses that she has known sexual intimacy with a man, and that she fears a subsequent lover will not be able to handle this. She asks him directly whether her sexual experiences make her 'very naughty?' but his response is comforting, 'What are you saying? A person who has so much courage cannot be *neech* (lowly).' His introduction of the term is striking, since in everyday parlance it connotes both a lowly caste and an immoral sexuality, and especially since Shail had not used it for herself. His attempt to redeem her from such taint thus has the effect of emphasizing the social consensus about sex outside marriage.

To Harish, Shail is also able to express her reservations about the attitudes of other men in the Party – particularly those of B. M., a thinly disguised version of the real-life Sukhdevraj who, in Prakashvati and Yashpal's assessment, misled Azad to believe the worst about them. It is not simply that male comrades are bossy, but also that they can be sexually predatory: 'men want to swallow women'. Shail reveals that B. M. wants her to leave her house and join him as his lover. But she does not want to leave her home for any man; wary of her earlier disappointments she says that now 'I won't expand my hopes to the point where disappointment makes me fear death and I find myself helpless' (32).

As they talk about these matters, the sexual frisson between them is palpable if unacknowledged. Harish recognizes that he

> was experiencing something new in his body and mind. After adopting the life of a revolutionary he had thought of women as something apart from his path. Despite coming close to Shail many times, he had not looked upon her as a young woman but as an associate member of the party who was different from other companions only in appearance and dress, but today his heart was repeatedly arousing him – she is a young woman, for the tenderness, sensitivity and contentment of life! Don't you recognize her? His heart was saying – you are not simply a machine for revolution, but a human being.
>
> (28)

The events that follow directly reference Yashpal's own experience within the HSRA. Summoned to a Central Committee meeting in Kanpur, Harish is accused of working against the Party, of advising people to help the Congress and especially the communists, of avoiding raising money through an armed robbery as he was enjoined to do. The list of charges is long: he 'wastes Party money. He wears expensive clothes, eats in fancy hotels, drinks, roams around in cars, and has illegitimate friendships with disreputable girls' (42). Moreover, Harish has asked

> a girl who has been helping the Party, and who wanted to leave her home to work for the Party [. . .] not to meet other people from the Party and not to leave her house so that he could keep her only as his lover.
>
> (42)

As Harish answers the charges, he ventriloquizes Yashpal's own political views at the time:

> Up to now, our entire effort has been to create secret associations. We can neither help the people not attain their co-operation by being locked up far away from them, locked up in caves and cellars. These pistols, revolvers and bombs are not only becoming obstacles in our path to revolution but are devouring us. [. . .] We handful (hundred-fifty) men cannot bring independence. Only the collective effort of the people can bring independence, and we are so far from the people.
>
> (45)

He cites the case of Russia where he says revolutionary activities had initially taken the form of terrorism, but Lenin understood the weakness of this method. B. M. jeers at him: 'we haven't yet freed ourselves from English slavery and you want to take on Russian slavery?' Dada insists that he has no time for such new-fangled ideas or intellectual debate: 'I know how to die and how to kill. I don't have the time for more than that.' After Harish leaves, Dada reiterates that he is merely 'a soldier fellow'. B. M. asks the comrades to consider Harish's fate. Beyond all the political charges, 'the most important question is – what will be the outcome of the relationships he has established with women? Will we go about arranging medicines for abortions? Whatever has been said against revolutionaries till now, no one has doubted their character. . .' (52). Dada mentions that much earlier, in 1917, there had also been a 'fight about women'. Clearly, it is dangerous to allow such problems to recur; all the comrades concur that no individual is more important than the Party and agree that Harish must be shot.

Harish goes underground, and eventually emerges in the house of a factory worker, where we learn that he is increasingly interested in establishing contact with men who are desirous of establishing trade unions. In a scene that builds upon Prakashvati's encounter with Azad in the bomb factory in Delhi, Dada and B. M. visit Shail. Dada asks her to reveal Harish's whereabouts, demands to know if she thinks the Party is more important than Harish, and quizzes her about their relationship. Unlike Prakashvati, who remains silent in her own version of the story – and who says to Azad that it is none of his business in Yashpal's version – in *Dada Kamred*, Shail replies that Harish is just a 'friend'. When Dada says he 'wonders' what the meaning of friendship between men and women can be, she tells him that she

> used to think that you people have very liberal ideas, but I am seeing something else. B.M. had said something else entirely about women's independence and older ideas [. . .] I cannot understand what you have to do with my personal

> relationships. [. . .] I want to help you people as much as possible but I cannot hear criticism of my personal behaviour from anyone other than my father.

Unlike Prakashvati and her love for Yashpal, Shail is not uniquely attached to Harish. She takes him to the house of her Christian friends Robert and his sister Nancy to keep him safe, confiding that she hopes to marry Robert, and articulating her attachment in rather unusual terms: 'Now he's the only one, and you are the other. . . .' (76). But so deep is the ideology of political devotion that Harish does not, or wills himself to not, pick up on this rather obvious indication of her sexual interest in him.

Like all of Yashpal's novels, *Dada Kamred* develops its concerns primarily through extensive and intensive conversations between people. Along with Robert and Nancy, Harish and Shail spend a few days in Mussorie, where they debate the meaning of marriage at length. Robert, who has moved from a deep devotion to Christianity to a passionate if theoretical attachment to Marxism, also meditates on the workings of capitalist economy, within which women, he says, function as another form of property. Therefore marriage 'should also be considered an enemy of human freedom'. Harish goes further – marriage, he argues, is merely a way of licensing sexual relations. Just as people will flourish if the oppressive laws of the nation are abolished, so too will men and women come to inhabit their true natures if marriage is abolished. Here the suggestion is that everyone is polyamorous in reality. Surprisingly, it is Shail who cannot agree that marriage and existing gender roles should be completely transformed. Only half-jokingly, Harish tells her, 'I know you don't agree because you want to dominate a man, and live off his earnings. I ask: if a woman wants a child why is she scared to take on the responsibility of raising it?' (90).

The two men push a parallel between women and the economically dispossessed. Robert observes that there are two contrasting types of socialism: one, which Gandhi advocates, suggests that rich people should improve the lot of poor. The second, Marxist socialism, believes that the poor should take over rule and administration. Shail is quick to grasp the implication that women too will gain nothing by depending upon the good will of men: she tells Harish: 'If you start this new revolution and instigate servants against masters and women against men there will be no place for you among good people' (92). By the end of the novel, a version of this prediction comes to pass. Here, in Mussorie, Shail feels that she is 'drowning in obligation to Robert' because in her relationship with him, she still has the freedom to express her fondness for Harish. Will such freedom still be appropriate or even sensible after marriage, she wonders? In her mind, the novel suggests, the rite of marriage clearly marks a major change, rendering inappropriate the polyamorousness that seems natural before it.

After Robert and Nancy leave for Delhi, she and Harish have long and intimate conversations, leading to one of the most striking episodes in the novel. Harish confesses he is jealous of Robert, and Shail also acknowledges that when she first met Harish she

> felt that she has been waiting for him, that there is a connection from a previous life. Brother, friend, child or husband: which connection was this she couldn't

> understand. [. . .] Is it necessary that human affection (*sneh*) should be limited to one person?
>
> (97)

Harish now asks her if he can see her naked; he won't do anything and only wants to see female beauty in its entirety. He explains that he wants to see and know what 'that mighty attraction' between men and women is. He won't have the opportunity or courage to ask this of any other woman. It is clear that he is still too cowardly to express this in terms of a desire for *Shail*, in particular, and therefore must speak in large theoretical terms. But Shail agrees; when she ultimately disrobes, however, she keeps her own eyes closed; Harish begs her to open her eyes once. She half opens them, then wraps her shawl around herself and asks him to leave the room. We can speculate about what motivates this vignette. Can she cope with the fiction that this is a conceptual exercise only with her eyes shut? Or does she shut them because despite her claims to sexual experience, it is too much to be situated as an object or means of a male experiment in sexual understanding? Afterward, both of them describe the experience in terms of an intimacy and satisfaction that goes beyond coitus. Harish feels 'as if she is his and he is hers'. Shail says she has gained 'a fulfilment at experiencing my existence. A path for confined emotions'. She now tells him: 'See, you want a revolution only in governance, but why don't you consider how lives confined in the ties of family and society suffocate? Should not individuals have the right to fulfil their erotic desires in their life?' (100).

Yashpal takes his time with this episode, developing it slowly, and lingering over moments that readers uncomfortable with issues of sexuality might be squeamish about. Whereas in their respective autobiographies Yashpal and Prakashvati describe their relationship in terms of fidelity and marriage, *Dada Kamred* builds on their initial experience within the Party to explore more unconventional relationships. It explores the demands made upon individuals committed to radical and dangerous political practice, and shows they may entail a necessary departure from normative modes of sexual interaction. After this charged interaction with Shail, Harish becomes increasingly involved in organizing and sustaining a strike action by workers of three cloth mills in Lahore. Disguised as 'Sultan', he moves into the workers' quarters. We hear later that he deliberately disfigures his face with acid so as to become unrecognizable. He also removes two lower teeth so his voice changes. Over the ensuing months, he is darkened further by constantly roaming in the summer sun, and becomes emaciated by lack of food and sleep. Robert and Shail are also part of the strike committee, with Robert serving as a mediator between the owners and the workers. The mill owners bring in substitute workers and spend money on anti-strike propaganda. As a man of independent means, Robert feels the pressure of raising money to sustain the striking workers, but also feels that Harish and other communist leaders are unreasonable in their doggedness. Finally, needing also to finance his ex-wife, he withdraws, telling Shail that it is perhaps her love (*moh*, a word that connotes sexual passion as well as a more spiritual devotion) for Harish, as much as her own political views, that will not let her do the same.

In the last part of the book, it becomes clear how closely these two are interlinked – Shail's political views keep pace with Harish's intensifying embrace of communist ideas, but they are also inseparable from her concern for him. Her father is on the governing board of one of the mills and disagrees on principle with the strike action; and while she lives at home, their differences also become manifest. One night Harish visits her in a state of near collapse – he is starving, sleepless with worry, and feels that he may go mad. Shail mothers him, feeding him, washing his filthy clothes and saying that she will help him sleep. As she embraces him, it is clear that she is moved both by Harish the person, and his political suffering. Harish begins to kiss her:

> In a while, he forgot his worries in the stimulation that arose upon contact with Shail's body. Shail's body shivered. With each shiver, Shail tried to come ever closer to Harish, and clasp him in a tighter embrace. She was apprehensive that Harish's restless mind would be enmeshed in worry again. She wanted to drown his consciousness. She had maintained her own consciousness. She cared not about herself but Harish. Harish forgot himself. She kept giving way to his desires. (138)

Harish finally sleeps, and as Shail watches, smiling at her own 'success', his disfigured face appeared 'even more beautiful to her'. In this episode, Shail's own desire is represented as taking the form of satisfaction that comes from giving him pleasure. Indeed, this is not radically different from the earlier episode in which she bares her body to him. In both instances, it is as if her pleasure lies in allowing his desire to emerge. But whereas in the earlier episode, she seems also to be testing her own ability to be unconventional, here there is a much more explicit desire to give him succour. In their coupling, given Harish's state, sexual pleasure seems the only way of soothing a body and mind ravaged by the demands of political action.

The differences between Harish's politics and those of his former comrades now surface sharply again as Dada and others begin planning a 'money action' or an armed robbery to finance the revolutionary underground organization. Dada hears about the labour strike and about Harish's immersion in it. It is clear that Dada's own attitudes and sympathies have begun to shift away from terrorism, but he carries out the armed robbery anyway. He visits Shail, who tells him that the increasingly fearful mill owners are pouring money into efforts to break the strike. The workers can win if they have the resources to hold out for a week. Dada gives the money he has robbed to her, and the strike is ultimately successful. Workers in other mills and factories also begin to organize themselves. In the meantime, Shail discovers she is pregnant. Significantly, she makes no effort to contact Harish; her only concern is how to ensure that she will be 'able to get the right to her own life' without also flouting social norms.

The stolen bank notes are traced back to the strikers and Harish and other leaders end up on trial for their lives. Shail tries frantically to organize the defence; despite legal advice to the contrary, Harish does not confine his own statements in court to stating that all the strike leaders were in public meetings at the time of the armed robbery, as he has been advised to do. He insists on giving a lecture on capitalist

economics and argues that the very process by which factories run is a kind of robbery from the working classes. A pregnant Shail watches as he is sentenced to death. This punishment seems excessive, but signals the fact that this was no ordinary robbery – it is a theft designed to hurt an entire class, a system, and not just the owner of the money.

Shail's father is shattered when he discovers that his daughter is pregnant, and even more so when she is unrepentant. Acknowledging that her father's biggest gift to her has been her freedom, she insists that she not done anything that shames her 'before her own intelligence'. Her resolve is firmed by invoking her lover:

> Harish, I will not be afraid. I am your companion, your comrade. [. . .] You heard the order for your hanging with a smile and I won't be able to walk? [. . .B]e afraid of the condemnation of foolish people? [. . .] What do I need? Only courage. Society will not be able to scare me, oppress me.
>
> (160)

In a finale that speaks to Yashpal's novelistic desire to bring together the sheer courage and uncompromising dedication of the best underground revolutionaries with the new political visions that he believed were necessary, the novel ends with the strange and unexpected alliance of Dada and Shail. Mourning the death of Harish, Dada comes to see Shail. He regrets giving her the money that led to Harish's death sentence, but she reminds him that it was also the means for winning the strike. She tells him that she is pregnant, and that Harish will therefore, in a sense, live on. She is Harish's 'wife', she says, and wants to go where she won't be stigmatized as a sinner. She asks Dada to take her away: 'I will give your Hari to you. You said I had snatched your Hari away.' Thus, the competitiveness between the erstwhile revolutionary leader and the woman he wanted to exclude from the organization is resolved. Shail has adopted the role of wife, which she was loath to do earlier, and she will now become the means of restoring Harish's heir to Dada. She is now including him in her family.

This suggestion re-animates Dada. He had thought that his life had now become 'purposeless' but she has 'given me work to do. I had thought that the flame is dying'. He takes her arm:

> 'Get up Comrade!. . . Are you worried Comrade?'
> 'No Dada, let's go! We'll go like this.'

The very woman who was initially understood as disrupting the political vision of revolution has now become, for Dada, his only 'comrade'.

Shail is not the female revolutionary that Prakashvati was. The vision of revolution to which Prakashvati and Yashpal had first subscribed and for which they risked their lives had had its moment. The heroism and martyrdom to which Azad and his comrades aspired had to give way to a less dramatic and less romantic form of action, but one that was no less dangerous while being just as socially and politically unacceptable. Indeed, *Dada Kamred* suggests that it was much easier for ordinary people to

have sympathy for militant revolutionaries; the task of building working-class organizations was far grimmer and far more open to being vilified and maligned. While the ending of the novel can be read as reducing the female revolutionary to the figure of a self-sacrificing mother, we should note that Shail is, in the end, not housed within an alternative marriage of convenience. Nor will she take money from her father, or languish in mourning her lover. She does look to another man for support, and this man is in a brotherly relation to her. But Dada is no longer the elder brother and patriarch as he earlier was. She is his comrade, and he now recognizes the value of the political vision which Harish died defending. Most importantly, Shail has given this vision an extra depth – she has, during the course of the novel, signalled the need to build anti-capitalist organizations that also allow space for sexual desire and love. Of course, when the novel ends, we do not hear what political work she and Dada will now undertake. At this point, Shail and Dada's future tasks seem only to rear Harish's child. The political here seems to be a future promise encapsulated within the personal – within the enabling relationship they have established.

There is a touch of the formulaic in the novel making Shail speak for the necessity of a fulfilling emotional and sexual life free of social constrictions, while having Harish embody the demands and visionary hopes of the political life. To that extent, Shail is a person whose life choices and decisions indicate the limitations of existing revolutionary movements, rather than being the prototype of a new type of female revolutionary. Yashpal indicates as much in his preface to the book, where he insists that Robert's ideas and Shail's behaviour should be understood as a diagnosis of a social crisis, rather than as a prescription for its treatment.

But even this diagnostic was avant garde in the context of the Indian political scene. Yashpal's concerns have caused scholars to try and understand where his unusual vision of gender parity and sexual freedom comes from – they have suggested that Yashpal's commitment to foregrounding gender issues owed much to his mother (Friend, *Yashpal's Life* 237). His own experience of early schooling in Gurukul Kangri, a revivalist school established by the Arya Samaj was also formative, but ironically so. Along with the implacably anti-British sentiments nurtured by the school, Yashpal recalled the strict emphasis on a celibate and masculine culture: 'Plays were produced for cultural development but they had no female characters. A society and a play were created where women did not exist' (Yashpal, *Yashpal Looks Back* 12). As Yashpal was to learn, this ethos shaped not only society at large but also revolutionary culture.

Yashpal was proud of the HSRA's difference from both the earlier Bengali underground, as well as the mainstream Congress.[33] However, as he later acknowledged, despite the word 'socialist' in the title of their organization, the comrades did not really understand how to bring about a socialist revolution, although they were attached to the idea 'with great determination'. (He notes, though, that in later life none of them worked for big capitalists, and many, like Durga Bhabhi, shunned the Congress when they saw it moving in that direction.) *Dada Kamred* provides a meditation on this issue, but also suggests socialist communities or politics cannot transform existent social

systems without dismantling traditional gender ideologies. He was aware of the controversial nature of the book, writing in the preface:

> Let alone others, *Dada Kamred* is in danger of hurting older revolutionaries. They may think of this an effort to belittle their importance, but I have no such intention. In this connection, one remembers Turgenev's novel *Fathers and Sons*. Upon the publication of this book, it was the revolutionaries who most insulted Turgenev, but ten years later this same book was understood as representative of revolutionary thought. The means of revolution are not individuals but ideas, and revolutionaries are not people but individuals. The cause of revolution cannot be completed by devotion to individuals but through belief in ideas.
>
> (6–7)

By the early 1950s, Yashpal believed that Indian communists' attitudes to sexuality and male–female relations had become both healthy and indicative of their political maturity; moreover, they vindicated his own earlier views:

> I thought hard about my behaviour and found no reason to think that my love had caused me to demur in any way from my revolutionary duty. At that time, most revolutionaries didn't agree with me, but modern revolutionaries seem to agree with the viewpoint I held then. Those people who are working in the Communist Party for the last ten fifteen years ignoring their individual aspirations and limits, I consider them revolutionaries [. . ..] In the communist party, for male and female comrades to acknowledge their romantic and marital relationships is considered the right way to safeguard morality.
>
> (*Simhavalokan* 258)

For this reason, he argues, many people think that communists are undisciplined and licentious, but the growth of the Party attests otherwise. For Yashpal, the communists' relative openness showed that they were far more 'realistic' than the comrades of the HSRA. He suggests that the crisis in the HSRA stemmed from a shift in the nature of revolutionary organizations. In the beginning, they were short-lived groups that were formed to execute particular actions and often dissolved afterwards. The time for a particular person to act in the organization was extremely limited, hence the notion that the revolutionary had to be single-minded. In fact, the HSRA was much longer-lived compared to the earlier groups. He notes that the 'communists today have been working for ten or fifteen years with the same zeal and devotion that earlier HSRA comrades worked for six months and we did for two or three years. These circumstances have made communists more realistic' in their attitudes to love, attachment and sexuality (*Simhavalokan* 259). Yashpal also contrasts the organizational principles of the revolutionary outfits in which the individual member's duty was soldier-like, to carry out the leaders' command with the communist party in

which 'it is not the individual but the cell that is important [. . . .] that is why although hundreds of communists rotted in cells in Telangana and Andhra they never betrayed their groups "dals"' (262).

*

In later years, Yashpal's fiction was not always sanguine about the democratic function or gender ideologies within the Communist Party, even as it paid tribute to the remarkable ways in which communists were re-ordering mainstream gender relations. His 1946 novella *Party Comrade* (later published as *Geeta*) and 1948 novel *Manushya Ke Roop* exemplify these divergent views. Both portray women in the Bombay Party during the early 1940s, a period and location that I explore in the next two chapters of the book. During this time, many erstwhile revolutionaries joined the communist movement, but the transition was not always easy for some of them. During this period, too, communist and other progressive writers – men and women – worked to explode conventional attitudes to gender and sexuality. For some of them, it was particularly important to question the bracketing of romance from political commitment.

One of the most famous articulations of such questioning is Faiz Ahmad Faiz's poem 'Don't Ask Me for That Love Again', which rewrote the conventions of the Urdu ghazal. In that poem, the speaker asks his (or her) lover not to expect the love they once shared, one which excluded the rest of the world:

> How could one weep for sorrows other than yours?
> How could one have any sorrow but the one you gave?
> So what were these protests, these rumours of injustice?

Now, having gone 'into alleys and in open markets', having seen 'bodies plastered with ash, bathed in blood', and seen 'them sold and bought, again and again' the speaker knows that although his lover is 'still so ravishing',

> There are other sorrows in this world, comforts other than love.
> Don't ask me, my love, for that love again.
>
> (Faiz 5)

In this poem, written about the same time as Yashpal's *Dada Kamred*, the speaker moves away from a world of intimacy built by isolating oneself from the demands of revolutionary engagement. Such engagement makes a single-minded devotion to love impossible. The poem registers both the necessity of moving away from the older type of love, as well as a certain sadness, a loss, in doing so.

Literary convention may compel us to assume that the speaker is male, but as a matter of fact women have been the poem's most famous performers. The story goes that when Faiz was released from prison after being jailed for his communist views,

the singer Noor Jehan sang it to a tune she spontaneously composed for it; from that day, Faiz started crediting her as co-author, and once remarked, 'It's not my song any more, it belongs to Noor Jehan now.'[34] It was also a woman – the communist doctor and writer Rashid Jahan – who possibly inspired Faiz to write the poem and transition from '*shabab* (romanticism) to *inquilab* (revolution)' (Jalil 77 n. 7). Rashid Jahan herself is emblematic of the new kind of communist woman who was attracted to a canvas larger than the ones women had been hitherto allowed to paint. Like her protégé Ismat Chugtai, she critiqued the conventions that dictated women's lives, insisting instead that the task of changing the world required a passion equal to any fabled romance.[35]

As I mentioned earlier, it is possible that Rashid Jahan also inspired Yashpal to create Shailbala in *Dada Kamred*. The poem and the novel work to seemingly opposite but actually complementary ends: where Faiz invokes the urgent need to engage with social issues in order to revolutionize formulaic notions of the all-consuming, all-fulfilling aspects of love, Yashpal uses the question of love and sexual desire to remake dominant notions of the revolutionary subject. It is not accidental that a communist woman might have inspired both critiques, for such women were engaged in both these battles, although not always simultaneously, or even self-consciously. Rashid Jahan herself wrote about these embattled issues. Most revolutionary and communist women, such as Prakashvati, did not necessarily fight with words, but their words and their lives allow us to reconstruct their struggles on both fronts.

Notes

1 Josh was a founder of the radical Kirti Kisan Party, and imprisoned in the Meerut Conspiracy Case against communists. His account of his contact with Bhagat Singh is useful for understanding the dialogue and differences between communists and Bhagat Singh, as is Ajoy Ghosh's *Bhagat Singh and His Comrades: A Page from Our Revolutionary History*. Ghosh was one of Bhagat Singh's co-accused in the Lahore Conspiracy Case, and he went on to become the General Secretary of the Communist Party of India.

2 After the HSRA attack in December 1929 on the Viceroy's train, Gandhi condemned the revolutionaries in an article, 'The Cult of the Bomb'. The HSRA replied with a pamphlet, 'The Philosophy of the Bomb' (whose authorship has been attributed variously to Bhagvati Charan Vohra and Yashpal, but which appeared under the pen-name Kartar Singh. The pamphlet accused the Congress of declaring a war on the revolutionaries instead of on the British. It also accused Gandhi of simply lecturing to people instead of interacting with them: 'Has he sat with the peasant round the evening fire and tried to know what he thinks? Has he passed a single evening in the company of a factory labourer and shared with him his vows? We have, and therefore we claim to know what the masses think.' The differences between Gandhi and the revolutionaries have been widely discussed; see, for example, Govind (54–81).

3 For example, Prakashvati, whose story I tell in this chapter, did not meet her family for five years; her mother met her fondly, but her father showed no interest in her. Her mother had not left the house for two and a half years because there was gossip that she had run away with a Muslim (Pal, 1987: 15). See also Mandal (133).

4 I am indebted to Bandopadhyay's article throughout this chapter.

5 The three volumes of *Simhavalokan* appeared in 1951, 1952, and 1955. Yashpal was writing the fourth volume when he died in 1976. I am using Nikhil Govind's translation of the title, which is more often translated as 'A Lion's-Eye View' Or 'A Backward Glance'.

6 'Pran,' 'Khaddar Posh Athva Kranti ki jai' (Agra, 1930) 1–2. British Library, Proscribed Indian Books (PIB) 21/7, 1. Translation mine.
7 The salutation is 'Bande' and not 'Bande Mataram', which was the widely used form of the nationalist salute to the motherland.
8 Notice that both officer and dissenting leader are Muslim here. Other Indian characters are Hindu. 'Pran' is thus keen to establish the heterogeneity of Indian society, and the need for a secular political organization to lead it; this was also the HSRA's view.
9 The episode is also elided in mainstream assessments of Yashpal. *KrantiDoot Yashpal* (Revolutionary Messenger Yashpal), a short film on Yashpal made by the Sahitya Academy and directed by Kamna Prasad, excises the episode entirely, retaining only a vague reference to friction between the two men. The film also excises any account of Prakashvati's own political participation, lauding her for loving Yashpal for his political work.
10 See for example the right-wing blog: www.dailyo.in/politics/chandrasekhar-azad-jawaharlal-nehru-mahatma-gandhi-hinduism-freedom-struggle-sardar-patel-subhas-chandra-bose/story/1/9233.html (accessed 6 April 2018).
11 This is how Kama MacLean reads Shiv Verma's statement that 'in order to get popular applause, our old revolutionary friends exaggerate the events and concoct stories – at times to the level of absurdity' (Maclean, *History* 11, 248 n. 69; Verma, 'Preface' 14).
12 Sukhdev was accused by H. R. Vohra, who turned approver; but Durga Bhabhi also told Kuldip Nayar that the HSRA 'suspected Sukhdev all along' (Nayar 109).
13 It is MacLean's elegant exposure of the bias of official documents that enables me to reverse the usual framing.
14 Translations are mine unless indicated otherwise. See also Friend, 'Yashpal'.
15 All translations from this book are mine.
16 In an interview, she suggested that Sukhdevraj's inappropriate behaviour should be placed in the context of those days, when 'boys and girls could not talk openly,' so that it was 'natural' that the other men should show an interest in her (Pal, 1987: 14).
17 See also Yashpal, *Yashpal Looks Back* (140).
18 There were also differences about some money that Prakashvati was supposed to have given for the party just before leaving house. According to Vaishampayan, they had understood that 'the girl' would bring 'thousands of rupees' with her, but when she came she was penniless; Yashpal claimed that the money was lost, but Bhagvati Charan didn't quite believe him and having observed the couple's 'mutual dealings, he detected the underlying story. Naturally, he was deeply perturbed' (123).
19 Azad was not highly educated, Prakashvati comments, but was a brave, honest, and open man. He lacked the judiciousness that is needed in a political leader, trusting his comrades implicitly, and 'this was one of the reasons for the weakness of our secret organization' (Pal, *Lahore* 28).
20 While the comrades did not agree on the significance of these events, I have not found any accounts that contradict Yashpal's on factual grounds.
21 Yashpal initiated the action against Azad's explicit orders.
22 Unless otherwise indicated, all further references to Bachchan's autobiography (first published in 1963, under the title *Kya Bhooloon Kya Yaad Karoon)* are to this translation, provided by Rupert Snell, who sometimes rearranges the material of the original. I have occasionally supplied my own translation.
23 *The Hindustan Times* of 7 July 1934 does describe her as 'a beautiful, small woman with a round face and large dark eyes, dressed in a white crepe "sari"'. But there is nothing about her make-up or the cut of her clothes.
24 This detail is available only in the Hindi version of Bachchan's book, *Kya Bhooloon Kya Yaad Karoon*.
25 The last two lines are my translation. Snell translates them very differently: 'such danger is feared only by the female side – I felt afraid, but why should Rani feel so, protected by her inner armour?' In my view, this translation distorts the meaning entirely, which attributes an essential masculinity to Rani and a femininity to Bachchan himself (Bachchan, *Kya Bhooloon Kya Yaad Karoon*).

26 Yashpal writes that in prison he was shown a sheet of red paper with a message in Hindi urging people to begin a revolution against the foreign government; it was signed 'Prakashvati, commander in chief' (*Yashpal Looks Back* 207).
27 I am deeply indebted to Maclean's essay throughout this chapter.
28 'Our Opportunity', Revolutionary Activities in India, British Library, IOR L/PJ/12/391, 1932. I am grateful to Kama MacLean for sharing this document with me.
29 I owe this conjecture to Kama MacLean.
30 Harivansh Rai Bachchan comments that upon reading the book, he recognized that the famous revolutionary had stayed in his own house (*Afternoon of Time* 145).
31 The phrase 'criminalize communism' is Ali Raza's. See Raza (317).
32 All translations from this book are mine.
33 As Yashpal writes in his autobiography, 'When Khudiram Bose and Kanai Lal Datta stood on the gallows they felt they were sacrificing themselves for Mother India or Mata Radha – in other words, in Hindu terms. The Kuka Mutiny and Wahabi Mutiny against the British were led by Sikhs and Muslims, also for religious reasons. We of the HSRA were proud of those who had preceded us in the struggle against foreign rule. We revered them, but we distinguished between communalism and nationalism, and we rejected the communal viewpoint. The reason was that the progress of Ireland, Italy and Turkey, and the Russian Revolution of 1917 affected Indian thinking and we were attracted to Marxist scientific materialist philosophy. . .' (*Simhavalokan* 98).
34 There are many versions of this story; for one, see Gaekwad.
35 For assessments of Rashid Jahan, see Jalil and Gopal.

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3

COMMUNE-ISM

Nationalist and Hindu chauvinist appropriations of the early revolutionary movements have been enormously powerful in post-Independence India, with the result that the socialist and communist orientations of many of the iconic figures within them have been all but forgotten. Colonial authorities, however, saw connections between them even when none existed. By 1935 the British Home Office and Secret Branch found it hard to

> disentangle terrorism from Communism in certain areas [. . . because] a number of terrorists, including many now in detention or who are inactive, have come to the conclusion that outrages on individuals by the terrorist party will not alone attain their object. They feel they must get the masses behind them with a view to violent revolution, and that they are not likely to do this unless they attract them by means of a Communist programme. In Northern India, terrorists have been even more attracted by Communism [. . .] than in Bengal.
>
> (GOI, 1935)

On January 27, 1936 Horace Williamson, head of the Home Intelligence Bureau, directed that 'every District magistrate and Supdt. [Superintendent] of Police should be encouraged to study communism and to insist on subordinate officers looking for signs of it in rural areas' (GOI, 1936).

It was actually during their long prison sentences that many revolutionaries, including women, became communists. As the Intelligence Bureau of the British government report noted in 1936,

> Most of the *detenus* in detention camps in recent years have been intensively studying Communism and Socialism and have been impressed by the value of

> an armed mass revolution as the means to obtaining independence [. . .] there exists in communism the obvious basis for the fusion of both schools of revolutionary idealism.
>
> (Hale 65)

Kalpana Dutt of the Chittagong group, Latika Sen of Shree Sangha, and Suhasini Ganguly and Kamala Mukherjee of Jugantar, were among the women who joined the CPI in Bengal. Ironically, none of the Punjab revolutionary women did, although both Prakashvati and Durga Bhabhi were clearly sympathetic to Marxism. As prisoners, the women read a variety of books.[1] Dutt recalls that during her first few months in jail, she concentrated on religious studies, but later she read books 'by Joad, Cole and Shaw' (Dutt, *Chittagong* 87).[2] These books 'forced' Kalpana to think about the differences between such books and those she was previously exposed to:

> narratives of revolutionary deeds, the lives of Khudiram, Kanailal, Bhagat Singh [which] no doubt stirred us to the very core, teaching us to defy death: but these writings on Socialism and Communism could not be set aside as irrelevant – and so the faint rumblings of a new battle could be heard within myself.

She fitted these new books

> into the trend of my own thoughts: and so it seemed that Communism was all right and that there was no difference between it and our own ideas. When someone would say that the Communists looked upon the terrorists as opponents, I would just laugh it off and could never believe it. If our ideals were the same and both of us had dedicated ourselves to the cause of freedom, then we were but fellow travellers and could never be opponents.
>
> (88)

Upon her release, Kalpana Dutt found that in Chittagong, only those of her revolutionary comrades who had joined the CPI were active in politics; they were now working among railway and dock workers, peasants and students (92). In 1943, *People's War*, the Communist Party of India's paper, had made the same point, claiming that 'Today every one of the Chittagong Armoury Raid Heroes who remained active – 90 of them in all – is inside the Communist Party' (Joshi, 'United Chittagong' 1). Later, Dutt was to write that 'every sincere revolutionary must find his way to communism [. . .] it was only a question of time' (Dutt, 'Santi Chakravarty' 4). P. C. Joshi, the General Secretary of the CPI, commented that Kalpana's reminiscences 'reveal how terrorism was the infant as Communism is the mature stage of their revolutionary lives' (Joshi, Preface 4).

In 1943, Kalpana married P. C. Joshi. Joshi's biographer calls it a 'historic wedding bringing together two revolutionaries from the hill tracts of Chittagong and Almora' (Chakravartty *Joshi* 114). But the British Marxist Victor Kiernan's comment is more apt: 'the marriage epitomised the absorption of part of the old Bengali terrorist movement into the CP [CPI]' (Kiernan 69). Even those revolutionaries from other

groups who did not join the CPI, like Bina Das, testified to the attraction of socialist and communist ideals: 'The revolutionary mind was attracted by a new ideal, a picture of a new social system.' But Bina felt that the CPI was 'being guided in every little detail by a foreign party' whereas 'Marxism must be re-established according to the needs of the country' (Das 53). Whereas Kalpana's reminiscences are really an account of her comrades in the movement and reveal very little about herself, Bina's are more intimate in nature. While in prison, Bina writes in her memoir, she had a dream in which Lenin himself indicated the problems of bringing about a socialist revolution in India. Lenin laughs at Bina, saying 'You Bengalis [. . .] are the best in the world for creating beautiful nothings with useless words.' Although he knows how 'passionately you are dedicated to a cause [. . .] you are totally unfit for the backbreaking and laborious task of pulling up a dying nation'. For him, even revolutionaries and nationalists in India are too elitist. 'With my Russian intelligence', Lenin says, he can't quite understand how Bina plans to effect a mass movement when even in prison she remains among an elite group of intellectuals who 'treat the common prisoners as your servants.' Indeed, he goes on to say, from 'Jawaharlal [Nehru] and Jaiprakash [Narayan] to all the communist students and workers today', no political leader in India can forget their superior position, or 'come close to the destitute millions of your country. [. . .] I had hoped that it would be India after Russia – but with such workers. . .' (Das 80–82). Perhaps this is Bina's own guilty class-consciousness speaking, but her dream critiques the class composition of the political elite, including those who called themselves socialist.

Meeting poorer women in jail proved crucial in reorienting revolutionary women, including Bina, towards socialism and communism. After her release from prison in 1939, she joined the Congress Socialists, among whom M. N. Roy, one of the founders of the CPI, now worked (see Appendix 2). Roy had urged communists to join the Indian National Congress and radicalize it, but was expelled by the Comintern and the Communist Party in 1929, when the Comintern instructed Indian communists to 'cease "engaging" with nationalist organizations, and to direct their energies to "exposing" the nationalist pretensions of these organizations' (Seth 140). But despite her own choice to follow Roy, Das noted that most

> politically inclined students thought that the Congress was too 'old-fashioned and dull', only fit for old people. In comparison, the Forward Bloc, the Communist Party, the Fourth International were so much more exciting [. . .] But most people were vague about leftism; according to them, anything exciting that roused the masses was 'leftism'.
>
> (61–62)

Socialism, communism, and the Soviet Union were of great interest to women who had once been part of the revolutionary underground, as is evident in the pages of *Jayshree* and *Mandira*, Bengali journals brought out by such women.[3]

Both journals were also the site of ongoing debates about whether women should devote themselves to reforming gender relations within the family and home *or* claim

a space in the public sphere.[4] Most women understood these as choices that could not be combined. *Mandira* was conceived of by revolutionary women in prison, and it published their accounts of incarceration. It also carried articles critical of the institution of marriage. Many women, including Bina, wrote essays extolling the lives of women in Russia (Dutta Gupta 155). In this journal Soviet women and new forms of coupledom in the Russia were seen as offering blueprints for an emancipated society. Eventually, as Dutta Gupta notes, the erstwhile dadas, or male leaders, of the revolutionary groups pressurized women to 'prioritize the "political" [. . . for] the autonomy emerging out of women's education and female bonding proved a new threat to the "big brothers" who had grown accustomed to seeing their 'little sisters' following in their footsteps' (164–65).

But for the erstwhile terrorist women, establishing new political lives involved changing their entire way of being in the world, their personhood. Bina writes:

> We were not adept at expressing our ideas clearly. From our earliest youth, we had worked with secret underground groups, where we usually spoke in whispers. This was the age of mass organization, where workers had to scatter sparks of inspiration through oratory and demagogic leadership. We attended mass meetings where we were impressed by the fiery, rousing speeches of leaders. We were charmed, but at the same time we felt depressed at our ineptitude, which was truly a disqualification. We felt depressed and thoughts of retirement came into our lives. [. . .] But it was not easy for us to retire from politics. Our lives had become entwined with the joys and sorrows of the teeming millions of our land. It would hurt if we tried to break off. It was our own necessity that would not let us leave, so we stayed on.
>
> (Das 62)

Eventually, Bina, like several other women who were once active in the revolutionary movement, withdrew from public politics altogether.[5]

Like Bina, Kalpana also confronted new questions about both public and personal behaviour. Even though she wanted to join the CPI, she was sometimes 'upset with someone's conduct: some [people] would come to lecture upon free love in the name of Communism, and this made no sense to me' (Dutt, *Chittagong* 92). Or she would see 'well-off boys' spending excessively in front of 'starving comrades' and justifying it 'by saying that Communists don't give way to sentiments'. But then, she was

> relieved to find that those who indulged in such words or actions had long gone out of the Communist Party or were about to be thrown out of it. There is no room for moral slackness in the Communist Party, nor for the self-centred and the selfish. Those who could correct themselves, only they remain, and plenty of opportunity is given to them to correct and improve themselves. Those who cannot or do not mend themselves are expelled from the Party.
>
> (92–93)

For Kalpana, such a 'moral' code was one possible bridge between her new creed and the old one, which were not easy to reconcile; writing in 1945, she confesses that 'Despite our acceptance of Communism and our pride to call ourselves Communists, our mode of thinking and of work bears the clear impress of terrorist individualism' (97). Nevertheless, she insisted that there was an essential connection between the two – the Communist Party taught revolutionaries like herself how 'we can move forward keeping up [. . .] the tradition of Masterda [Surya Sen]' (101).

Kalpana's writing reminds us that despite programmatic differences between the terrorists and the communists, the latter *did* maintain some of the gender mores and ascetic values of the former. 'Free love' made no sense to Kalpana, but it is also the case that no one in the CPI openly advocated it. Nor did the Party develop a systematic critique of dominant sexual mores (though extremely patriarchal practices were critiqued as 'feudal' or 'bourgeois') or integrate such a critique within its programme. Despite this, as I will discuss below, many communists, male and female, made choices that pushed against dominant notions of the family, coupledom, and parenthood.

*

At the time Kalpana Dutt was writing, the most explicit critique of both gender asymmetry and sexual mores in India came not from any CPI leader or member, but from M. N. Roy, who, as mentioned earlier, had been expelled from the CPI in 1929. Roy declared that 'in the social organisation of India, women occupy, and have always occupied, the position of chattel' (Roy, *Memoirs* 53).[6] He addressed Indian women thus:

> You are worshipped as goddesses. Are you? Don't you know that the laws of Manu prescribe that your supreme duty is to satisfy the sexual desire of man, not of your own choice, and bear children for your lords? According to the same scriptural injunction, you must be faithful in your sex-slavery; but your partner can have more than one instrument of sex-satisfaction.
>
> (Roy, *Memoirs*, 53)

Gandhi's asceticism seemed particularly hypocritical to Roy. He pointed out that Gandhi's creed of sexless marriages pivoted on an equation of sex with sin and on a denial of female sexual desire:

> Gandhi advises women to resist lustful husbands. It is rather flattering for the fair sex. But few will be deceived. Sex-attraction is mutual. Women are no more goddesses than men are animals. [. . .Moreover] Gandhi's advice to women assumes that they are free agents. Are they? Does Hinduism permit women to resist their husbands? [. . .E]ven in modern countries, where women have much more rights than in India, resistance is a legitimate ground for divorce. It is regarded as a violation of the marriage contract.
>
> (Roy 'Ideal', 113–14)

Roy challenged the idea that Western sexual mores were corrupting Indian women. In Hitler's Germany, he pointed out, the ideology of woman as breeder was official creed. On the other hand, the Indian ideal of a woman's place being the home was at odds with the reality, since 'multitudes of women' not only worked both in and outside the home, but did so without any economic rights or independence. Roy's critiques of women's sexual subservience in marriage and the reality of their work outside the home were later incorporated and developed in the writings of individual Indian communists such as Renu Chakravartty and Hajra Begum. However, during the 1930s and 1940s, there was no equivalent attempt on their part to bring Western socialist ideas about female emancipation into conversation with Indian realities (Farooqi and Chakravartty). Thus, Roy's critiques were particularly important for, as Kris Manjapra suggests, 'Roy reframed the image of the revolutionary to focus on women as revolutionary actors', and made it possible to think about intimacy, rather than just public action, as a ground of politics (181).[7]

Were the comrades who lectured Kalpana Dutt about free-love in the name of communism drawing upon Roy's views? Or had they been exposed to the views of Rosa Luxemburg or Alexandra Kollontai, both leading European Marxists who held unconventional opinions about intimacy, love and politics? It is significant that M. N. Roy had had links with both Luxemburg and Kollontai. He was a friend of August Thalheimer, a close associate of Luxemburg, and had lived for two years with Louise Geissler, who was part of Rosa Luxemburg's group the Spartacus Bund (Jayawardena 241). He had closer connections with Kollontai, who was one of his 'discussion partners in 1920s Berlin' (Manjapra 173). It is therefore possible that he was influenced by their ideas in his own critique of sexual and family mores in India and within the nationalist movement.

Luxemburg was herself no advocate of free-love. She was devastated at the unfaithfulness of her lover and comrade Leo Jogiches. But she did question the ideal of the dispassionate revolutionary that had been enshrined in left movements. The anarchist Sergey Nechayev had influentially enunciated such an ideal in 'The Revolutionary Catechism':

> The revolutionary is a doomed man. He has no personal interests, no business affairs, no emotions, no attachments, no property, and no name. Everything in him is wholly absorbed in the single thought and the single passion for revolution. [. . .] All the gentle and enervating sentiments of kinship, love, friendship, gratitude, and even honour, must be suppressed in him and give place to the cold and single-minded passion for revolution.
>
> (Nechayev)

Despite their differences with the anarchists, many communists adopted this creed, including Jogiches. Luxemburg, on the other hand, insisted that revolutionaries needed to have full emotional lives, writing to Jogiches:

> Your letters contain *nothing but nothing* except for news of *The Workers' Cause*. Say something nice to me! [. . .] When I open your letters and see six sheets

> covered with debates about the Polish Socialist Party, and not a single word about [. . .] ordinary life, I feel faint.
>
> (Ettinger xv; emphasis in original)

My point here is not simply that Luxemburg valued a fuller *inner* life, but that her *politics* also demanded passion. Her letters, as Jacqueline Rose astutely notes, show the 'ceaseless traffic between the personal and political'. (Rose 8).[8]

Alexandra Kollontai's radical opinions about love and sex stemmed from an analogous belief that 'Love is a profoundly social emotion. Love is not in the least a "private" matter concerning only the two loving persons: love possess a uniting element which is valuable to the collective' ('Sexual Relations' 279). She believed that a revolution in sexual and gender relations was crucial to establishing a new society. Accordingly, the

> sexual act must be seen not as something shameful and sinful but as something which is as natural as the other needs of a healthy organism, such as hunger and thirst. Such phenomena cannot be judged as moral or immoral.
>
> ('Theses' 229)[9]

At the same time, Kollontai also believed that the family as an institution was 'ceasing *to be necessary either to its members or to the nation as a whole*. The old family structure is now merely a hindrance' (253). She argued that it needed to be replaced by closer ties among all people in a society. Under communism, she wrote, 'the individual has the opportunity to develop intellectually and emotionally as never before. In this collective, new forms of relationships are maturing and the concept of love is extended and expanded' (231).

We can see why many of these views were regarded as libertine in the West, in the Soviet Union, and in India, especially as they often circulated in a distorted or exaggerated form – as exemplified in Kollontai's purported belief that having sex was like drinking a glass of water. 'The Loves of Three Generations', a short story from her 1923 collection, *The Love of Worker Bees*, is frequently (and erroneously) cited as the source of this 'glass of water' theory of sex. This is because it features Zhenia, a young woman who believes that sex does not have to be accompanied by love, and that having non-monogamous sex does not constitute a betrayal of one's romantic or conjugal partners.[10] Zhenia has had sex with her mother's partner Andrei, who also shares this philosophy. They do not reveal this fact to Zhenia's mother, Olga, because both believe that their relationship does not interfere at all with that of Andrei and Olga.

Olga cannot understand this point of view, nor can she see how it as an attitude appropriate for communists: 'That's what I find so dreadful, the fact that they seemed to lack any warmth or kindness, even the most rudimentary sensitivity to others! And yet they call themselves communists!' (Kollontai, 'The Three Generations' 206). As a young woman, Olga had shocked her own mother by simultaneously loving two men. She had not hidden her passion for a new man from her partner of many years, and she also did not believe that a new love obliged her to leave her that partner.

Olga's mother Maria believes that Olga is acting out of some mistaken notion of fidelity, and urges her to leave one or the other man. Maria herself had left two husbands. She left one because she fell in love with another man, and she left the second because she caught him having an affair with their maid. For her 'love had more rights than had conjugal obligations' (185). The story thus explores changing attitudes to love, sex, and partnerships through three generations; each of the women is a revolutionary in her own way, but none can agree on what is radical, or indeed moral, in sexual relationships.

Although Zhenia defends casual sex, she does not use any language comparing it to drinking water (or vodka) as so many commentators on the story assert with great assurance. Such a comparison is made however, in 'Vasilisa Malygina', another of Kollontai's stories, by a woman who describes her partner's casual attitude to a nurse he has slept with: 'Vasya had come to realize that the woman really meant very little to Volodya, no more, as he put it, "than a glass of vodka, something to drink and forget"'.[11] Because these stories shocked contemporary readers, the line is mistakenly attributed not only to Zhenia, but to Kollontai herself. However, far from endorsing such an approach to sex, in *Three Generations* Kollontai explores the three women's experiences and philosophies as positions in a complex debate, asking readers to think not only about different kinds of sexual relationships, but also bonds between women.[12]

Kollontai famously clashed on various matters with Lenin, who did refer negatively to the 'water theory of sex' which 'has made our young people mad, quite mad' (Zetkin). Barbara Evans Clements conjectures that he may have taken the phrase 'from the popularized, vulgarized version of Kollontai's thought then circulating in Russia as a justification for promiscuity' (323). On a visit to the Soviet Union, the American Louise Bryant observed that: 'Periodically, Kollontai attacks family life and claims that it is the only institution that Communists are afraid to reform' (Bryant 128). But the reality was somewhat different. As Kollontai's work and life attest, the family had become a contentious site of reform, and some of these reforms, initiated by Kollontai herself, had generated a conservative backlash.[13] As Kollontai puts it, 'My theses, my sexual and moral views, were bitterly fought by many Party comrades of both sexes' (*Autobiography*). The Kollontai–Lenin 'debate', if it can be called that, travelled to India too. Indian communists active during the 1940s with whom I spoke all knew about the 'water theory of sex' – most attributed it to Kollontai; others knew only of Lenin's denunciation of it. This denunciation was widely quoted in communist publications.[14] But according to Tara Reddy, this was not uniformly the case; she recalls that they 'discussed Lenin's views on women's oppression, as well as the debates between Lenin, Kollontai and others on the question of women's emancipation' (Saldanha 50).

While Kollontai's critique of the family and dominant sexuality was marginalized in the Soviet Communist Party, her belief that housework and childcare should be collectivized – that communism 'liberates woman from her domestic slavery and makes her life richer and happier' – was indeed translated into Soviet practice. And information about *this* part of her work did circulate in India, since Soviet child care

and maternal benefits were extolled by Indian communists (and even by others who were not part of the left movement), as did images of heroic Soviet women, fighting against fascism and toiling in factories or farms.[15] Indian communists experimented with the idea of shared domestic labour in a different way when, during the 1940s and 1950s, communes were set up in many places across India. Information about them is scarce, perhaps because, as I have already noted, erstwhile members of the Indian left have not only privileged certain kinds of memories over others, but have also tended to regard reminiscences of personal life as insignificant.[16] In what follows, I have attempted to bring together the scattered and often-difficult-to-obtain memories about life in communist communes. Fragmented though they are, these recollections show how collective living fostered alternative visions of both the individual and the family, and, in doing so, formed durable communities between spheres commonly demarcated as 'public' and 'private'.

*

The word 'commune' derives from the medieval Latin *communia*, meaning a collectivity formed for the self-conscious purpose of sharing labour, property, and values. Marx and Lenin, among others, repeatedly offer the example of the Paris Commune of 1871 as a laudable form of *political* organization, but the commune as a concept has also inspired different living arrangements all over the world. In India, the most abiding prototype of communal living is the ashram. As A.S R. Chari, a radical lawyer and inhabitant of the Bombay commune, observes in his *Memoires of an Unrepentant Communist*,

> In our country, the tradition of the 'gurukuls' is a long and venerable one. People would provide provisions, cook and fag for the guru, and learn from him. [. . .] Following this tradition, Tagore established Shantiniketan, Gandhiji the Sabarmati Ashram, Rajendra Babu the Sadakat Ashram and even the gnome-like Shankar Rao Deo had his ashram in Saswad near Poona. However, the CPI was the first to establish a commune in the heart of Bombay.
>
> (105)

CPI leader Mohit Sen recalls that the British communist and ideologue

> Rajani Palme Dutt later criticized this arrangement as too monastic and cut off from life. I now wonder if he was right. Perhaps such communes were in line with the tradition of ashrams in our country that Mahatma Gandhi revived. In any event, it was living idealism.
>
> (Sen, *Traveller* 19)

It is true that the tradition of the ashram provided a culturally familiar prototype of communal living, devotion to a higher ideal, and a fusion of work and living space.

Communes, like ashrams, signalled the possibility of new affective communities, often requiring, or enabling, a breaking of ties between would-be members and their biological families. But, at another level, communes demanded a radical break not just from traditional and familiar ideals of the family, but also with the principles and practices of religiosity, ascetic asexuality, gender segregation, and retreat from urbanity that were enshrined in most ashrams. Thus, even if they reverberated with the idea of the ashram, communist communes radically modified many of the constituent features and ideals of the traditional ashram.

The best-known Indian commune was established in Bombay once the Communist Party was, in 1942, legalized due to its stance on the Second World War. The CPI had first dubbed Britain's participation in the war an imperialist effort to retain her empire. But after Germany attacked the Soviet Union in 1941, the Party reversed its position, declaring that it was a 'people's war' against fascism that called for a united front of the kind Chinese communists had forged against Japanese aggression. (Chapter 5 will discuss the complex political situation that this position produced.) The film director K. A. Abbas remarked on the ironies of the changed situation:

> A year ago, if the police had managed to locate these premises, one would have read in the newspaper headlines to the effect that 'Red Den is Discovered in City'. But today the CPI was legal and its activities might be carried out in broad daylight. This was one of the many contradictions in the present situation – ex-ministers were in jail, ex-conspirators free; bourgeoisie papers had to close down, while communist papers flourished and could be sold openly even to 'Tommies' and American 'G.I.s'!
>
> (Abbas 254–55)[17]

The commune existed first in a building called Raj Bhavan on Sandhurst Road, and then expanded to two other locations. Photographer Sunil Janah, who moved to Bombay from Calcutta at the invitation of CPI general secretary P. C. Joshi, remembers that:

> We lived in three different houses. The premises on Sandhurst Road had all the fine editorial offices, rooms for the three top Party leaders, Joshi, Adhikari, and B. T. Ranadive, and their families, and a few other senior comrades who lived and worked there. It also had a kitchen, a pantry, a large dining hall, and a larger hall for meetings, with the last being generally used as a common room. The people working on the editorial and organizational side of our paper and publications were housed in another building, which we had capriciously named the 'Red Flag Hall'. It was located some two hundred yards down the road. The third building, a dilapidated mansion of a house located on its own spacious grounds, was rented in suburban Andheri to accommodate our cultural squad.
>
> (Janah 10)

In its heyday, the commune was not just a collective dwelling and workplace, but also a place where art and political activity intersected in vital ways.

The cultural squad to which Janah refers was the brainchild of P. C. Joshi, who nurtured a dynamic relationship between the Communist Party and the arts. The need for such a relationship was imbibed from European communists, who perceived the importance of the 'widest possible mobilization against fascism', one which became urgent after the Nazi attack on the Soviet Union in 1941 (Prakash 133). What was unusual about the CPI's Central Cultural Squad was that many of its members were full-time Party functionaries, and were therefore understood to be part of its vanguard. When the repertory company of the famous dancer Uday Shankar was disbanded, Joshi invited many of its leading lights to help create the squad, a decision that both ensured the high quality of the performances and, as a later chapter will discuss, catalysed some deep schisms within it.

The allocation of spaces changed from time to time. According to A. S. R. Chari, the first floor on Sandhurst Road also had

> the editorial offices of the Party organ, *People's War*, in five languages: English, Marathi, Urdu, Hindi and Gujarati, the Party Library and the press-cuttings section. On the second floor were the common dining hall and kitchen, the common room for newspapers, lounging and gossiping, a room each for four families, and the photography room.
>
> (105)

Victor Kiernan, who periodically lived in the commune, recalled that in these three buildings

> were crowded a growing number of men, and a sprinkling of women, from all over India, veterans and beginners, plebeians and aristocrats, Hindus and Muslims. [. . .] Living and working among them was on the whole the most exhilarating experience of my life. As the chaotic turmoil of the war went on this 'Commune', as it was christened, came to seem an oasis of sanity. [. . .] All sorts of visitors were to be met with there.
>
> (67)[18]

These visitors included comrades and sympathizers; writers such as Krishan Chandar and Yashpal; musicians such as Ravi Shankar; theatre and film notables such as Habib Tanvir, Balraj Sahni, and K. A. Abbas; politicians such as C. Rajgopalachari; and intellectuals and socialites such as Romesh and Raj Thapar; as well as a range of people from abroad, such as *Life* photographer Margaret Bourke-White, who toured the country with CPI photographer Sunil Janah.[19] Another person who visited, as we see in this rare photograph of the commune, was Gandhi's associate Miraben. Here she is seen chatting with Joshi, with Parvathi Kumaramangalam, Kalpana Joshi, and Parvathi's brother Mohan Kumaramangalam looking on.

FIGURE 3.1 Miraben with P. C. Joshi, Kalpana Joshi, Parvathi Kumaramangalam and Mohan Kumaramangalam in the CPI commune

(Courtesy: P.C. Joshi Archives, Jawaharlal Nehru University)

Some of these visitors left behind brief accounts of the commune; in her dairy, Margaret C. Godley, a British social worker, recalls being taken to this 'large, shabby set of offices in a shabby street' by Party sympathizer Pilly Wadia in July 1946:

> There we entered the abode of the young and eager, all working hard in a veritable hive of activity. We were greeted with welcoming smiles and I was shown all over the building. The occupants of most rooms seemed to be taken up with newspaper work, and propaganda was being prepared in English, and in various Indian languages. A large pencil sketch of Lenin hung on the wall of the rest room. [. . .] In another room, the wife of P.C. Joshi (leader of the Communist Party) was looking after her small baby, which lay chuckling on a bed, surrounded by Communist photographs and slogans. Mrs. Joshi – shy and quiet in appearance – gave an account of her young anarchist days in Bengal, where she, aged 14, joined a group of revolutionaries and learned to use a gun without scruple. These quiet Indian women have a strongly deceptive appearance.
>
> (30–32)[20]

FIGURE 3.2 Kalpana Joshi with baby in the CPI commune

(Courtesy: Joshi family)

If, for Godley, the slight Kalpana Joshi embodied the deceptive strength of Indian women, the commune, in all its shabbiness and simplicity, signalled the sheer audacity of its inhabitants. A secret report of the British Home office concurred, attributing the communists' strength to their

> capacity [. . .] to identify themselves completely with the classes whose cause they profess to uphold. Their acceptance of a frugal, even squalid, standard of living is the counterpart of the Congress approach to the masses based on Gandhi's mysticism and the homely appeal of khaddar and the spinning wheel.[21]

This comparison cannily identifies the ethos of austerity that was shared by Gandhians and communists even though they held radically different attitudes to the question of poverty. Rajarshi Dasgupta has commented on the ascetic ideal embraced by communists, suggesting that some of its quasi-religious lineages intersected with Gandhian aesthetics (Dasgupta, 'The Ascetic Modality'). For some comrades, given the conditions of abject Indian poverty, austerity was the only possible moral ideal. Others understood that it was contingent on these conditions, rather than an ideal *per se*.

The Home Office report went on to reproduce what it called 'the unbiased impressions of an American journalist' who had been invited to dine in the commune,

> which is located on one of Bombay's congested streets above a government grain shop where there is usually a queue waiting for rations of rice or cereals.

> A dingy series of cells, the quarters are reached by a narrow unlighted stair with worn wood treads which leads up through two bolts of odour, one of stale cooking, the other definitely of latrine.
>
> From this unimpressive headquarters, the Indian communists are making their bid for national Power in India. Padding about barefoot through the dingy halls, they prepare their newspaper the 'People's War' which is printed in English and four Indian languages and go about the other multifarious activities of an Indian political party. They certainly have no front of prosperity in the material sense but, I believe, they suffer no inferiority complex on this account. They have a very go-ahead air.[22]

Preeti Banerjee (nee Sarkar) of the Central Cultural Squad remembers that, 'it was economically a tough life for all at the Andheri commune but everyone was aflame with the dream of a free India, free from social, economic and cultural exploitation' (Ray, 'Preeti Banerjee'). Victor Kiernan attributed the ability of the commune inhabitants to put up with so little to the fact that the

> privations were equally shared, except that a few seniors had small rooms of their own. Each person received a monthly wage of five rupees (there were thirteen rupees to the pound), in addition to board and lodging. It came to be a rule that Commune members must cut themselves off from relatives outside, so that those from better-off families would not have access to free meals or other luxuries; though I was welcomed each time I came to stay partly because my comparative affluence enabled me to supply old friends with cigarettes. We slept on thin mats on hard floors, in the building or in annexes that had to be found as numbers grew; the main one was in the suburb of Andheri. Meals were sparse; they included meat, as a great treat, once a week. We ate in rows, sitting on the ground, a mode I always found indigestible. It occurred to me sometimes to recall that not long before I had been accustomed to dine at the high table of Trinity College.
>
> (67)[23]

A grimmer picture of these privations emerges from other memoirs. In Calcutta, the commune members lived on so little that it was a treat for them to occasionally dine at the houses of the workers they organized (Kaul 107). When Manikuntala Sen, an important leader of the women's movement and of the Communist Party in Bengal, wondered how she could manage on 20 rupees a month, Party leaders asked her if she expected to live like a princess. During the Bengal famine of 1942–1943 conditions were especially dire, and the comrades, working among the starving people all day, often went hungry themselves, giving what little they had to children in the commune (Sen, *In Search of Freedom* 70–71).

Shaukat Kaifi, the well-known actress, has provided one of the most detailed accounts of the communes at Andheri and at Red Flag Hall in a memoir of her life

with her charismatic husband, the legendary Urdu poet and communist, Kaifi Azmi. She recalls that eight families shared one bathroom and one toilet, but, 'in the years that I lived in Red Flag Hall, I never witnessed any disagreement or quarrel over these facilities. [. . .] All of us joined together to celebrate Holi, Diwali and Eid' (81). All the children played together and were mothered by all the women, but only one of the women was a Party member at this stage. Comrades often helped each other out financially, even though all of them lived on the edge of starvation. Meals were served at 10 a.m. and 7 p.m. In the Andheri commune, Shaukat remembers, 'breakfast was an important ritual which the comrades shared in the dining room before setting off on the tasks assigned to them by the Party' (49). Everyone washed their own dishes and clothes and took turns sweeping and swabbing the floors.

Clothing was simple and often in short supply. The men wore 'half-sleeve shirts and short pants' as Joshi himself did, to save cloth, and the women 'simple, single coloured mill woven sarees as women workers wore' (Sen, *Traveller* 19). Although the Party wage was to go up to 40 rupees per month in 1945, it was not enough to pay for clothes (Joshi, 'Our Mai'). The wage was lower in other cities.[24] Comrades used to collect second-hand clothes from Party sympathizers and were dubbed, in a fine burst of irony, 'Commissars for bourgeois contacts' (Chari 107). In the Delhi commune, winters would make things even harder. There, two comrades would have to share a single coat, one going out to work while the other slept (Shakeel). Sarla Sharma, who lived in the Delhi commune with her husband Y. D. Sharma, recalls that 'we all shared clothes. The person who had four, gave to others. No one minded getting clothes like that' (Sharma, personal interview).

In both Delhi and in Bombay, everyone in the commune was required to sell the Party paper; in Bombay, they did so wearing 'grey-green uniforms like ARP men' (Chari 107).[25] To the amusement of younger comrades, the future General Secretary of the Party, Ajoy Ghosh, was too shy to be successful at this activity. In the pages of the Party paper, P. C. Joshi had instructed comrades:

> Wherever you are, whether it is a railway compartment or a tea-shop, fraternize with the people, dig out 'People's War' and read it out to them, discuss with them. [. . .] Discussing with the people, selling 'People's War', collecting cash for the party – this should be your job wherever you are.
>
> (Joshi, 'A Communist at Work' 3)[26]

They also organized 'prabhat pheris', early morning processions when they sang revolutionary songs such as Makhdoom Mohiuddin's 'Yeh jang hai jange azadi' ('This is a war, a war of freedom') (see Appendix 2).

The atmosphere in Bombay was remembered as both hectic and heady. 'With about 60 comrades speaking different languages, working tirelessly and with a great spirit of comradeship', A. S. R. Chari writes, 'life in the commune was both interesting and inspiring' (106). Shaukat Kaifi's account of her life in this period is infused with memories of this 'charmed world' full of 'enlightened and humane individuals

who were struggling to create a new world for the poor' (49). For Sunil Janah, the commune enabled a radical new way of imagining one's identity:

> Living and working together had generated kinships amongst us. [. . .] There were people of all communities and of all kinds of economic backgrounds from all parts of the country in the Communist Party. I did not, or could not, think of myself as a Bengali middle-class Hindu from Calcutta, or Muqbul Batali as a Kashmiri peasant from Baramula, or of Parvathi as a Tamil Brahmin. We did not even have any need or compulsion to think of ourselves as Indians. We were human beings working for peace and social justice everywhere on the planet. I have never been able to understand some people's angst-ridden quest for their identity and the question, 'Who am I?' that it poses. The identity they seek is usually genealogical, racial, regional or religious.
>
> (28)

Whereas Kiernan remembers a general lack of humour among the comrades, lamenting that only the 'least subtle' of the limericks he made up for the wall newspaper were appreciated, Janah recalls much shared levity:

> Although our jobs were pretty serious, we found enough in each other and in our world to keep ourselves amused. Among the leaders, only Ranadive did not indulge in unbecoming levity, although he was capable of it. Joshi and Adhikari, on the other hand, radiated jollity and fun. [. . .] Comrade Jalaluddin Bokhari had elected himself as the president of the All-India Madcap Association, which he had founded and to which he co-opted Jashwant [Thakkar], Parvathi and me as joint secretaries. His slogan was, 'People who call us screw-loose do not understand the machine age. No machine can function smoothly unless some of its screws are loose.' His wife was a Marathi Hindu, a Bombay textile mill worker. He fraternized with everyone and had once asked her to come with him for a cup of tea. 'Do I come with you only now, or for all times?', she had asked. And he had taken her after tea to a marriage registrar's office!
>
> Nobody got sacked from the Communist Party for being batty or for deviations other than political.
>
> (26)

Janah's photographs capture Party comrades at picnics and at the seaside, their faces suffused with the glow of more than just youth (see Plate 5).

The ideology that informed the formation of this community involved the decentring of the bourgeois family. Kiernan recalls one young women telling him that

> The Party had come to be her *family* [. . .] which she felt she must stick with in spite of not infrequent frictions. It must have had the same appeal to many of her generation, as a replacement for crumbling old family ties; and there must have been a psychological link between the old despotic sway of the family and

> the new, equally irresistible rule of the Party. Youth was throwing off one authority and hastening to submit to another, as perhaps has often happened. Ordinarily behaviour was easy and informal; people came and went unchallenged, until once on returning from the north I was surprised to find a sentry on duty, and was told that someone had been murdered by an intruder.
>
> (67)

Kiernan identifies the possible connections between familial hierarchies and those that structured political communities and, moreover, implies quite perceptively that the demands of both can be compulsively attractive. Shaukat is more benign in her interpretation of both institutions, suggesting that the commune facilitated an expansion of familial love to others – not only to those within the commune, but also to suffering countrymen at large:

> Although they were from different parts of India, these people were like one family where everyone was addressed as 'Comrade', which at the time meant an evolved human being. [. . .] I saw that the people in the commune cared not only for those who were close to them, but were concerned about their immediate families as much as they did about the workers, the peasants and the labouring classes. Their aim in life was to free the weak from the cruel oppression of the exploitative capitalist system.
>
> (Kaifi 51)

The manner of Shaukat's entry into the Andheri commune explains some of its attraction for her. She was raised in a Muslim family she describes as 'mildly progressive' and not overly religious, who lived in the feudal princely state of Hyderabad – the political epicentre of the Telangana uprising, led by the Communist Party (see Appendix 2). Shaukat's is a tale of a political and romantic awakening. She first met Kaifi at a Progressive Writers' Association (PWA) gathering, and admired his nerve at reciting 'a powerful poem against the monarchy and injustice in the Nizam's city' (27; for more on the PWA, see Appendix 2). When Kaifi recited his radical poem 'Aurat' or 'Woman' which begins 'Arise, my love, for now you must march with me / Flames of war are ablaze in our world today', Shaukat tells us, 'I fixed my gaze on Kaifi, convinced that he had written this poem for me, and I alone had the right to march with him' (Kaifi 31).

Shaukat's description of her romance with Kaifi follows the conventions of a 'Muslim social' (this is a term used to describe Bombay films that featured Muslim lives and particularly the romances of young people). The young lovers communicate through poetic innuendo, in meetings both facilitated and thwarted by the dictates of her family; Shaukat sprays her perfume on him, and he slips her poems that convey his love. Shaukat's family forbade the two to meet, and, in a pretty bit of melodrama, her cousin to whom she was betrothed offered to shoot himself. Kaifi, back in Bombay, pined, and, not to be outdone, wrote to her in his own blood! Ultimately, one of his commune mates sought permission from the Party to try and win over Shaukat's father. He was

successful, for Shaukat's father escorted her to Bombay without telling his wife or the rest of the family. He wished to test the situation. Father and daughter, Shaukat tells us,

> went to Kaifi's tiny room, in which there was a loosely strung jute charpai with a dhurrie, a mattress, a sheet and a pillow. In one corner, there was a chair and a small table on which there were some books, piles of newspapers, a mug and a glass. The simplicity of this room touched my heart and I thought, 'Just you wait, little room I shall lavish such love on you that your destiny will change.'
>
> (44)

For Shaukat's genteel father, the idea that his daughter would live in such conditions was horrifying, and made worse by the fact that meals were eaten in a common room:

> Lunch in the commune was unlike anything I had seen. Everyone had an aluminium plate, two bowls, and two low wooden chukis (one for sitting on and the other to use as an improvised table). The cook served the food, which was a daal, a vegetable, four chappattis with ghee, some rice, salt, onions, a slice of lemon, and I think, some pickle on the side. Everyone washed their own utensils and put them away. I was watching Abbajan's every move, anxious that he might take umbrage and ask me to return with him to Hyderabad. I saw him bristle and it was obvious that he found it distasteful to eat out of metal dishes. After a few mouthfuls Abbajan rose quietly, adding under his breath, 'I will not wash these.' I rushed to pick up his plates, washed them with mine and put them back where they belonged.
>
> (44)

Unpalatable as such communal life seemed to her father, for Shaukat it offered an attractive new dimension to the idea of the family, one that was to sustain her all her life. She was struck by the fact that these people did not

> shame us or unsettle us with disapproving looks. [. . .] How different this was from the world I had left behind, where people lacked compassion and were quick to draw attention to what they considered a human weakness. My first impression of Kaifi's friends strengthened my resolve to marry him.
>
> (43)

Shaukat loved both the comrades' departures from familial conventions, but also the ways in which they replicated older familial conventions. Razia Sajjad Zaheer was 'as affectionate as Ammajan would have been,' lending Shaukat her own wedding clothes and gold bangles. Other comrades stood in for the ritual roles performed by parents, for the wedding ceremony was not, as one might expect, a secular affair, but a *nikkah*, during which the comrades had to do some clever manoeuvring to disguise the fact that the bride was Sunni and the bridegroom Shia (45). Shaukat herself fluctuated between playing the conventional shy bride, and forgetting to do so, thrilling to the presence of guests such as Ismat Chugtai, the fiery writer.

FIGURE 3.3 Newlyweds P. C. Joshi and Kalpana Joshi on the terrace of the CPI headquarters

(Courtesy: Joshi family)

Of course, many weddings in the commune took secular and even radical forms. P. C. Joshi and Kalpana Dutt were married on the open terrace of the commune, with music being provided by Benoy Roy and the Party's Cultural Squad. Tea and biscuits were served, and the bride's red sari sent by the groom's family was later cut up into red flags (Chakravartty, *Joshi* 114). The marriage of Chari's sister-in-law Leila and P. Sundarayya (a central committee member who was a major figure in the Telangana uprising) simply took the form of the couple telling Joshi that they would live together as husband and wife. The very difficulty of forging unusual alliances, and of sustaining them in trying circumstances, can entrench the power of marriage. But for some comrades, such as Chari, living in the commune enabled a departure from

> a life lived as individual islands of I's, husband and wife etc. There is a lot of humdrum tedium and a lot of waste. I am all for life in a commune. There is privacy when you feel the need for it. Otherwise you are right in the stream of life and working for a better life.
>
> (108)

Life was not necessarily easy for those who were new to this existence: Kitty Menon, who had recently moved to India from Britain, recalled that when she married Ramdas Menon and moved into the commune, she found it 'awkward to sit

on the floor to eat. I was shy of coming down the stairs even for my morning cup of tea' (Chatterjee, 'Kitty Menon' 21). Having discovered that Kaifi was addicted to his morning cuppa, Shaukat was fixated with acquiring proper tea cups, tray and tea-cosy – all the *accoutrements* with which tea was served in her own home:

> Though sympathetic to the Party's concerns, I was lost in my own world where my primary concern was that tea must be drunk with the utmost propriety. One morning when P. C. Joshi [. . .] walked into our room. [. . .] 'What do you do the whole day?' he asked. I was overcome with shyness but managed to say, 'nothing'. He smiled and said, 'The wife of a communist should never sit idle; she should involve herself alongside her husband with the work of the Party; she should earn money, and afterwards, when she has children, she should raise them as good citizens; only then can she claim the right to be the wife of a worthy communist.' [. . .] I was not a Party member and Kaifi had to pay an extra thirty rupees a month for my food. As a whole-timer it was very difficult for him to find the time to earn a livelihood, but he had little choice. (54)

Later, Shaukat began to perform on the stage to earn some money. Kitty Menon also had to start earning when the couple moved away from Bombay, as only one of them could afford to be a Party whole-timer. A man's Party work was considered more important, so it was always the wife who was asked to support the man by taking on a job (Kaul 85).

Sometimes marriages were practically arranged by the Party. In an interview she gave in 1991, Kalpana Dutt said that she had refused P. C. Joshi when he first proposed, because Tarakeshwar Dastidar, her comrade in the revolutionary underground, with whom she was in love, had asked her to wait for him. She hesitated even after Joshi told her that Tarakeshwar was dead. But the Party leaders 'B.T/ [Ranadive] and Doc [Gangadhar Adhikari] insisted, so I married him' (Dutt, *Chattogram* 122).[27] As Tanika Sarkar has commented, male leaders took 'emotional decisions on behalf on women cadres, erasing their autonomy in these deeply personal matters' (12).

As a young girl, I used to hear older women mention 'farzi shadis', or 'contract' marriages, usually in hushed tones. In such marriages, particular comrades were enjoined to marry one another for pragmatic reasons. In an interesting coincidence, word *farz* in Urdu means duty, whereas *farzi* means nominal, fake or illusory. While the two words are not etymologically connected, the former deriving from Arabic, and the latter generated from within Urdu, *farzi shadis* could combine both meanings – they could be marriages in name only, or real marriages carried out in the line of duty. Many took place when the Party was underground, or during militant campaigns such as the Telangana rebellion. These situations also entailed comrades pretending to be married while they lived together in a particular den.

I have so far discussed only the urban communes, which were mostly inhabited by middle-class or educated people while the Party was legal. But these were not the only communes in the country. In Andhra, for example, underground dens were de

facto communes; other forms of collective living were also established more self-consciously. Some of the problems of sexuality cropped up in these communes as well. S. Sugunanna, who fought in the Telangana rebellion, recounted the possibilities and problems in an interview:

> So the Party was like a large common family. We dreamt that the Communist Government would come – and all families would be communes like this. Never would we go back to these separate families – with each for himself. [. . .] Around that time when we were underground, some marriages took place. [. . .] Two or three of the men wanted to use me. Some of them were married. I felt greatly troubled that even in the Party people could be like this. After developing the faith that the Party was pure – nothing like this could happen, when it did happen, I felt that the only protection I could get would be through marriage.
>
> (Stree Shakti Sanghatana 87)

Sugunanna was only 14 years old at that time. Upon the Party's urging, she married a man who was 30. She talks of her awareness that 'it wasn't really for marriage – or a married life – it was because I had to marry someone to find a solution to my problems'. Probably also because of her age, Sugunanna was fairly conservative herself; she was 'repelled' by women who had affairs. Mentioning a woman who contracted gonorrhoea, she says she

> couldn't bear these things. [. . .] That such things should happen in the dens really troubled me. If communists can behave like this then what does it matter where one is [. . ..] I couldn't discuss this with anyone because of Party discipline.
>
> (87, 90)

Kondapalli Koteswaramma has stories of women being harassed by comrades. Savitramma, wife of Party leader C. Rajeswara Rao, was also very disturbed. 'Is there no difference between sex maniacs and comrades?' she complained to her husband, asking him not to separate husbands and wives in dens. But Rajeswara Rao said that it was impossible to do so, and that these were 'human weaknesses' (Koteswaramma 38). Contract marriages were supposedly a way of protecting single women, but any marriage that was unusual was often designated by that name. One can only imagine how scandalous the idea of a *farzi shadi* was in the eyes of most people. Moti Uddayam, another Telangana fighter, recalled that when she worked for the 1946 election campaign of Dr. Acchamamba (a Dublin-trained gynaecologist and an important member of the Communist Party), she and her comrades were called the 'contract marriage gang' by the Congress Party workers because Dr. Acchamamba was reputed to have such a marriage with her friend Venkataramaiah, although his first wife was still alive. The scandal was exacerbated by the fact that, earlier, Acchamamba had been 'in love with a doctor called Vithal Rao. They had lived together. They said they would exchange garlands later' (Stree Shakti Sanghatana 191). But Rao's sister supposedly locked him up, preventing him from going to his own marriage! Moti Uddayam recollects that 'she wanted him to marry her

daughter. She finally got him to do that' (192).[28] Whether this story is true or not, it helps us gauge the extremely traditional worlds in which communists were operating and, therefore, the novelty and audacity of their actions. The Congress workers followed the communist girls around, called them the 'contract marriage gang', and declared that they also wanted to have such marriages with them. At the same time, they abused them as whores, making it clear what they thought of contract marriages. Moti Uddayam recalled swinging a pot and cutting one man's lip in retaliation.[29]

It is easy to overlook the hostility or sheer incomprehension communist women encountered in the 1940s and 1950s. When they went out trying to recruit middle-class women, they were told, 'This is a respectable family. Our women won't talk to you' (quoted in Dutta Gupta 180).[30] Some slurs were predictable. The Kolkata newspaper *Anandabazar Patrika* dubbed them 'public women' (Dutta Gupta 220 n. 11). In Bombay, a Congress candidate for elections called the women of the Marathi Cultural Squad '*nautch* girls'. The women confronted him, forcing him to apologize before his own audience.[31] It was no easier in rural settings: Manikuntala Sen recalls that when she went to a village with a male comrade, 'The men of the household did not come to meet me because I was a woman. The women weren't coming forth either because I was a political leader and hence the equivalent of a man' (*In Search of Freedom* 48). At the same time, within the Party they were often positioned 'not as independent political subjects but as wives, mothers and daughters,' even as they were asked 'to participate in the class struggle' (Dutta Gupta 192). As the next two chapters will show, although communist women shared many of the culturally dominant notions about appropriate modes of gendered behaviour, they also fought hard to dismantle such attitudes and to carve out a new political space for themselves and other women. While the communes housed only some of these activists, they made it possible for women to live without fear and to forge strong and sustaining friendships with each other and with men in a culture where this was hardly possible.

Both in communes and outside them, the Party frowned upon certain relationships, as Sunil Janah describes in a light-hearted way:

> With so many young, unattached men and women, working for a common cause, being thrown together in the Party, romantic attachments were constant hazards. I had myself become involved with an intelligent, attractive girl, who seemed to be very sweet and innocent. Joshi did not reprimand me, he rarely did, but he said, 'It's all wrong – A to Z. It will not work out.' He asked me to go to Kashmir for three weeks in response to Sheikh Abdullah's request to photograph the session of the National Conference taking place there soon, and to think it over. When I came back, she had, sweetly and innocently, transferred her affections to someone else! But we remained good friends.
>
> (29)

One has to wonder, though, about the misery of those who could not move on so cheerfully when the Party leaders decided that their relationships ought to be abandoned.

Of course, sometimes marriages took place despite the Party leadership's disapproval, both within and outside of communes. For example, when Manikuntala Sen married her comrade Jolly Kaul – a man ten years her junior – the Party leaders were upset. Kaul attributed their behaviour not only to their belief that 'the ideal revolutionary was somewhat like that of the ideal *sannyasi* [hermit]', but also to the patriarchal outlook of many leaders. They implied that the marriage would harm Manikuntala's chances of being elected to the Bengal State Assembly and that the age difference was not appropriate: '[W]hile nothing was openly said, their attitude and body language suggested that in deciding to get married we were harming the Party in some way' (Kaul 179, 303–4).

And yet, as Sen writes,

> Many girl students were attracted by the positive attitude that the socialist movement had towards women and were drawn towards the Party. When this led to a conflict with their families, they tried to stand on their own two feet, to the extent of leaving home with the Party's help.
>
> (*In Search of Freedom* 80–81)

For many women, especially those who were not well-off, communes literally enabled their break from families. Bani Dasgupta, for example, grew up in rural East Bengal; when her father died, her uncles threatened the young girl, saying that if she did not abandon her communist activities, they would force her mother to live the miserable life of a Bengali widow. Her mother herself came to the young Bani and urged her to disregard the threats and do what she wanted. Bani ran away and came to Calcutta and went straight to the Party Commune (Dasgupta, personal interview). Usha Dutta Verma also describes running away from her conservative family which had begun discussing her marriage when she was 11 years old; her grandmother's 'ambition was the procure me a rich *kulin* (Brahmin) groom regardless of his age' (Verma 13).[32]

After Usha got involved in a student agitation at school, she contacted the local branch of the Communist Party and told them that she had to leave:

> The majority in the party were against sending me to Calcutta. They believed that a runaway girl would give the party a bad name. No girl would be allowed out of her house in the future. But Induda, the secretary sent me to Calcutta with a comrade taking full responsibility for this action. [. . .] I was put up at the house of a Faridpur comrade in Calcutta. Induda had written a letter with instructions that I should be sent to Ranjit Ray's house. [. . .] He exploded like a *brinjal* in hot oil when he saw me: 'It would have been better for you to have laid out your neck on the railway track than come here like this.'
>
> If it had been now, I probably would have acted on his advice. But in those days I had great strength of mind. Besides, I had begun to relish the taste of freedom. I believed no one had it in them to kill me. I felt I was a floating like a hyacinth.
>
> (Verma 15–16)

After many adventures, she heard that the comrades

> were trying to start a commune for women. I was told that I could join them if I wished. It felt as if I had been handed the moon without even asking for it. [. . .] I tied up my bundles and arrived at the commune. I met a girl from Faridpur called Sachi Lahiri. It was here that I formed an unbroken relationship with Sachi. People would refer to us as Usha-Sachi. We would wander around everywhere; we would even sell the party newspaper and pamphlets together.
>
> (17)

In Andhra, too, girls who left home were shielded in communes. Communes also made life and work possible for comrades who emerged after years of living underground, as Kanak Mukerjee has noted in her memoirs. While the bourgeois press painted life in these communes as regimented and colourless, in reality,

> This atmosphere of joint life in our commune was quite warm. [. . .] There may have developed differences of opinion over some issues, but I do not recollect conflicts over any petty self-interest. We who were married did not feel any unease at living with others while living a conjugal life.
>
> (quoted in Marik, 'A Double Invisibility' 93–94)

Children were born and reared in the legal communes (although they could not be part of the underground ones) but it was not easy on them or their parents. When the lawyer A. S. R. Chari and his family moved to the commune in Sandhurst Road, his son Lalit was only 8. The Party paid them a monthly stipend of 20 rupees for his schooling. But, as Chari reflects, 'the commune was no place for children' (108). He thinks that the polyglot atmosphere was the reason why 3-year-old Indi, the daughter of N. K. and Parvathi Krishnan (the latter ran the commune when Victor Kiernan lived there) did not learn how to speak. When sent away to her grandmother, she 'picked up both Tamil and Hindi in just six months!' Lalit was older, and 'quite precocious', absorbing the intense atmosphere 'like a sponge. Lalit had in those days a great fascination for film tunes. So, when he was just 8 years old, he not only wrote a poem in English about the National United Front in China, but set it to tune of the hit-song "Zindagi hai pyarse" in the film *Zindagi*' (108–9).[33] Lalit was fluent in English, and

> he moved and spoke like an adult, so much so that all the comrades treated him like one. They would tease him, knowing that he would hit back. Nevertheless, Lalit used to be so keyed up all the time, that we decided to send him out of the commune to Didi's brother at Dadar, Mangesh Gokarn, an electrical engineer in Tata's Power Supply who had three children. Lalit lived with them and became 'normal' quite soon.
>
> (108)[34]

Even though he places the word normal in scare quotes, it is clear that Chari and his wife did not see the commune as a healthy environment for Lalit. Nevertheless, the six years he spent in the commune were, for Chari, 'the happiest period of my life' – a time that allowed new ways of imagining the self. In the case of these two children, we see that the non-communist family (often progressive in orientation, but sometimes not) had to come to the rescue when the communist family did not work.

This was also the case when Shaukat was pressured to have an abortion because the Party felt that with Kaifi underground, and with Shaukat herself not earning, the baby could not be financially looked after:

> The Party called a meeting to discuss the matter. I stood my ground, saying, 'I want this child and I shall find the means to look after it.' All the comrades tried to prevail upon me but I had made up my mind. [. . .] Finally, the Party had no choice but to endorse my decision to have my baby. I decided I would go home to my parents in Hyderabad and upon my return I would earn sufficient money to provide for my child.
>
> (71)

But Shaukat, who did bring up two children in the commune, describes communal parenting in the warmest terms. Kaifi, an otherwise faithful Party member living on the edge of penury, declared that he would find the money to send their daughter Shabana to Queen Mary's Convent because the child was obviously unhappy at her local school. The convent had a requirement that both parents should know English, which neither Kaifi nor Shaukat did, so two of their English-speaking commune-mates posed as Shabana's parents.[35]

For many Party members, especially those who did not come from wealthy backgrounds, this was perhaps the hardest aspect of 'declassing' themselves as demanded by Party ideals: their children were in danger of having to forego even the most basic necessities (a subject that I will return to in subsequent chapters). This voluntary impoverishment, along with the fact that children also made it difficult for both parents to do full-time Party work, was why many couples (both in and outside the commune) resolved to remain childless. That P. Sundarayya decided to have a vasectomy was well known in Party circles. Kondapalli Sitaramayya was also ordered to have one because both he and his wife were underground (Koteswaramma 35–36). Bani Dasgupta told me that, when she and Prabhat decided to get married, her mother was very worried about their future, and the future of their children, especially because he had had tuberculosis. At that time, there was a supposition that the disease could be inherited. Prabhat went to see her mother, and Bani said she never learned what they talked about, but after the visit, her mother agreed to the marriage. The implication was that he had assured her they would not have children – and they never did. The Party family both demanded and enabled such decisions. But they came at a steep price for many comrades, especially those who had no family wealth or savings to fall back on in their old age.

When the Party emerged from the underground in 1942, Victor Kiernan tells us, it had adopted 'the policy – attributed by some to Joshi – of turning all active members

of the Party into full-time workers' (65). Most of those who lived in the Bombay commune were 'whole-timers'. The concept of 'professional revolutionaries' was first advanced by Lenin in his famous *What Is to be Done?* In this text, Lenin argues that a cadre of organizers, freed from any other professional obligations and committed entirely to Party work, was necessary to keep the organization on the right political path.[36] The idea was also embraced by Stalin. In India, the young Bhagat Singh adopted it as he contemplated a revolutionary organization.[37] It was to become especially important to the Indian communists because of mass illiteracy among working-class Indians. Rosa Luxemburg suggested that the practice would be detrimental to Party democracy because it would breed too much dependence upon the Party leadership. Given the economic dependence of many Indian comrades upon the Party, this was precisely its result. Kiernan had noted that the organization of the Party

> provided a powerful striking-force, but an unbalanced structure, with an overgrown bureaucracy detached from rank and file, and it reduced the likelihood of any independent criticism of decisions taken at the centre, any check on the wide and even freakish swings of policy that any untrammelled command is liable to. [. . .T]he tendency to turn young intellectuals, in particular into whole-timers, and either wear them out or reduce them to party hacks, was to continue harmfully into later years.
>
> (65–66)

For many young people, the idea of devoting themselves entirely to the revolutionary cause was enormously attractive; A. S. R. Chari, trained as a lawyer, gave up the profession to join the commune; his wife Dilshad also quit her job as the headmistress of a girls' school, and her sister Leila, Sundarayya's future wife, gave up her clerical position in a bank. Kiernan speculates that such

> enthusiasts could be seen reacting against national habit or temperament, trying to behave oppositely from most of their countrymen. The more anarchically undisciplined a national temperament – in Old Russia, for instance, compared with Germany – the more thorough regimentation individuals will feel it necessary to impose on themselves when they enter a movement with a serious purpose.
>
> (66)

It was for this reason that

> Communists setting out to revolutionize their country felt a compulsion to begin by revolutionizing themselves. The Party stimulated it, by methods sometimes too schoolmasterly. At Lahore at one stage all members, whether full time workers or not, were called to fill in weekly time-table details of how every hour of each day had been employed.
>
> (66)

There does not seem to have been such regimentation in the Bombay Commune, although there were expectations that the comrades would adhere to their tasks faithfully. Shaukat and Kaifi, for example, were sternly reprimanded by Sajjad Zaheer when they skipped the Sunday meeting of the Progressive Writers Association to see a film.

'Professional revolutionaries' came in all shapes and sizes, for it was not just dynamic young people who were enjoined by the Party to devote themselves to the cause as whole-timers. Kalyanibai Syed – mother of Dilshad and Leila, mother-in-law to Chari – also joined the commune and began to run the kitchen and look after the sick-room. I turn to her story at some length because it is so evocative of the culture of the commune, and the ideology of the Party as a new family.

*

Mai, or 'mother', as Kalyanibai Syed was called by all the comrades, had already led an unusual life before she joined the Bombay Commune. She was a Mangalorian Brahmin widow who had remarried, and to a Muslim man at that. She had previously worked for the Congress. Although she was not formally a CPI member when she was appointed to run the commune kitchen, she knew many of the comrades through her children, who were members. She used to send them food while they were underground and kept an open house for them. When she died of cancer, Joshi wrote a long and heartfelt tribute entitled 'Our Mai' in the Party paper, *People's Age*. Mai was a 'good and noble woman and a real mother to us all in the Commune', Joshi writes, adding that, because he lost his own mother early, it was 'Mai's fostering care in the Commune' that showed him what a mother could mean ('Our Mai' 6).

According to Joshi, before Mai along with her family to join the commune, she was very anxious about her children's decision to give up their jobs and become whole-timers. She told Joshi that while she was not worried about herself, because she could go back to her village and earn her keep as a midwife, she was anxious that Chari, Didi, and Leela might 'not come up to your expectations [. . ..] I will not be able to stand that. I cannot stand the shame'. Joshi writes that he was

> tongue-tied and slowly recollected my wits and said with my head bent in reverence: '*Mai, you are not yet formally a Party member, but you are a better Party member than Chari, Didi and Leela all rolled into one. You are a Party Member from now on. You do your duty by the Party and trust your children and have faith in the Party and it will be all right.*'
>
> ('Our Mai' 6; emphasis in original)

Joshi thinks of Mai's professional and revolutionary duty as the expansion of her maternity – she is to extend her housewifely skills, to enlarge her role as mother to embrace all the comrades. Indeed, he describes her as 'the happy old woman who found in our Party not only her love for her children but also for her country embodied together' (7).

But Kalyanibai was clearly not always 'happy'. The commune had expanded rapidly, beginning with eight people and swelling to a hundred and twenty. As Joshi noted,

> No ordinary family grows so fast in three years and in our collective life and Commune organization, real difficulties began when we crossed the number of sixty, with comrades of all ages, and classes, from all provinces talking different languages and doing different jobs, and yet living together under one roof, eating in one kitchen and under one single Mai. Pressure of work would continuously grow on all comrades and Mai as well.
>
> To run such a big family was no joke. The Bombay climate is bad for new arrivals from the north: the sick room began to be over-full. Young ex-student comrades had lordly anarchist habits and would always be late for food. Mai would know no rest, worry herself to death and shout at those who would come always late or forget to drink their milk and so on.
>
> (6)

Joshi overheard many of the comrades grumbling about Mai, and so he told her that she was 'shouting too much. Some of the comrades feel bad and worse, they feel insulted etc. You had better pull up'. Mai was 'stunned; all the self-confidence disappeared from her big broad face'. Joshi had already decided on his tactic for making her feel better: the problem, he told her, was that the commune had grown so quickly that she didn't – indeed, couldn't – know everyone personally the way she used once to. But if his intention was to suggest that she should not feel so invested in each person, and therefore also not try and keep such close checks on them, Mai 'reduced my wise analysis to pulp by telling me: "*But I regard them all as my own sons. They are all Party members, why should they feel that way?*"' (7).

Joshi's description of Mai here reverberates with Alexandra Kollontai's idea of motherhood as it would be reformulated by the new communist ethos. Kollontai had written:

> The woman who takes up the struggle for the liberation of the working class must learn to understand that there is no more room for the old proprietary attitude which says: 'These are my children, I owe them all my maternal solicitude and affection; those are your children, they are no concern of mine and I don't care if they go hungry and cold – I have no time for other children.' The worker-mother must learn not to differentiate between yours and mine; she must remember that there are only our children, the children of Russia's communist workers.
>
> ('Communism and the Family')[38]

Without any self-consciousness, Joshi writes that he 'asked her [Mai] to take it easy and pick out for herself some good Baus (daughters-in-law) and Bitias (daughters) out of

very good Party families and bring them along to assist her' (7). A 'Party family,' he implies, is one whose members are committed to the cause; its women are thus available to run the larger family or the commune. Housework, even when collectivized, remains women's work, as indeed it was even in Kollontai's radical vision.[39]

Joshi's essay is a testimony to the power of the alternative family of the commune but, at the same time, it also reveals the fusion of two powerful traditions of motherhood – that of the Indian mother and that of the heroic communist mother, radicalized through her children. The latter came to India via Maxim Gorky's novel *Mother*, which was very influential among the Party comrades. It had been translated into Bengali and Hindi in the 1930s, and into Telugu, Marathi, and Punjabi in the early 1940s (Sahitya Academy; Ramakrishna). In Andhra, it was required reading for comrades.[40] There, after reading the novel, several comrades commented that they thought that Bullemma, who organized a commune, was

> really the 'Mother'. When we sold our property, we gave our parents their share, gave the children their share and gave ours to our mother – the Communist party. Even Bullemma sold her property and gave the money to the Party. Even when she did not have a pie's worth of property – 'you are all my wealth' – she used to say to us. There were others to help, but she knew each one's tastes and requirements. She knew who was ill, who needed exactly what. [. . .] Sometimes if we were late, we would think: why disturb her, and buy some bananas to eat. Then she would say – 'I know you have not eaten – here eat some rice and curd otherwise you will feel weak in the morning.' She was more tender and caring than a mother. [. . .] Who else would look after us like that?
>
> (Koteswaramma 157)[41]

As we can see, the description parallels Joshi's account of Mai. Bullemma's real-life daughter-in-law also described her in identical terms: 'When we were all in jail, and one by one they were shooting down the ones outside, she fell ill, and all alone she would rave, calling out each comrade by name and saying have you come? [. . .H]ave you come my son?' (Stree Shakti Sanghatana 158).

Kiernan recalls that in his time 'the Commune had a talented manageress in Parvati [*sic*] Kumaramangalam' who came from a wealthy nationalist family and had studied at Oxford (see Plate 3). But Parvathi hardly had the social and intellectual profile of a woman who would cook, keep house, and become surrogate mother to the commune. She would later become a noted trade unionist and parliamentarian. Women like Mai, on the other hand, could be celebrated for having imbibed their revolutionary sympathies from their offspring, and for serving a larger collective of children. As in life, so in death, it is Mai's motherhood that is celebrated by Joshi:

> Mai died as all Indian mothers like to die, in the lap of her devoted husband, surrounded by her son, daughters and sons in law.

> *But who is the Indian mother who could claim that she has won the love and respect due a good and true Mother from over a hundred young men and women drawn from all parts of India [. . .] whom she herself organised for life together for life together in one joint family, our Party Commune.*
>
> ('Our Mai'; emphasis in original 7)

Motherhood, so iconographic within different types of Indian nationalism, and in the culture at large, remained symbolically powerful in the communist movement, even though many communist women did not become mothers themselves in order to work full-time for the Party. Thus, Kiernan's suggestion that to be a revolutionary was to discard what he calls the 'national temperament' is not exactly right. On the one hand, the commune as an institution did allow communists to escape the demands of the biological family, and think beyond the well-being and futurity of blood relatives. But on the other hand, the ideals of the Indian family continued to shape some of the ideologies and practices of the commune. In the new family, as in the old, some women indeed broke conventional expectations; but others were expected to carry on with their old tasks, only under a new roof, and for a different set of 'family' members. Still, most women felt that communes freed them from 'domestic slavery', and allowed them to live and work as communists in a world that was only too ready to taint them as deviant (Dutta Gupta 201).

The Party enjoined comrades to distance themselves from their families, but women could also be asked to placate them. IPTA activist Rekha Jain has described how her mother-in-law believed that Rekha's dancing was bringing shame to the family. Joshi advised Rekha to 'patiently persuade her mother-in-law and even bow down to her if necessary' because the latter was acting out of 'love' for her. Joshi's biographer tells us hastily that upon being served an elaborate meal when visiting Rekha many years later, Joshi advised her not to waste time preparing many dishes, but rather to combine everything in one big hot pot, interpreting this as an instance of Joshi's unusual consideration for women (Chakravartty, *Joshi*, 116). Indeed, many other communist women, even those who did not hero-worship Joshi (as did most of Party's 'rank and file'), remembered him as someone who nurtured women (Kaul 175). While this might have been true, he was evidently loath to challenge some of the gendered conventions of the family – and, as I have already shown, he even imported them into the Party family.

*

I have been able to locate only one literary work in which the Bombay Commune is featured: *Manushya Ke Roop* (Forms of Humankind), a novel by Yashpal, written while he was in Lucknow Jail in 1949 but not published until 1964. I turn now to this book, not only because it provides a snapshot of the daily routine of the comrades – it features both P. C. Joshi and Mai as characters – but also because it comments astutely on many of the issues I have touched on above, especially the gender dynamics within the Party family.

Manushya Ke Roop is interested primarily in the relationship between gender and social mobility. It traces the journey of a poor hill woman – named Soma – from a miserable life as a put-upon and widowed daughter-in-law, in an impoverished rural family, to the life of a major film star in 1940s Bombay. It does so by weaving her story with those of three other people: Dhansingh, an itinerant truck driver who spirits her away but is imprisoned for doing so; Manorama, an educated woman from a wealthy business family of Dharamshala, who takes Soma in and introduces her to the ways of genteel folk; and Bhushan, a young communist organizer. As Soma moves upward in society, Manorama loses many of the privileges of her station once she is divorced and becomes alienated from her family.

Manorama has had a long and fluctuating association with both the Communist Party in Lahore, where she is a student, and with Bhushan. Although never a Party member, she has been attracted by its ideals and has written occasionally for Party journals, despite not always agreeing with the Party line on certain issues. Manorama desires Bhushan, but is angered by his patronizing attitude – he often treats her as though she is not entitled to her own opinions, especially with respect to Party doctrine. She is also disappointed and irritated by his attitude towards love, which he regards as an unnecessary distraction for a political being – a dangerous luxury. As a single woman, Manorama is necessarily under the thumb of both her father and brother. In need of an escape from family pressures, she enters into a hasty marriage with Sootlivala, a rich Bombay admirer who turns out to be both impotent and callous. In the depths of despair, and alone in Bombay without any support, she remembers that Bhushan is now in the city as well, working for the Communist Party newspapers there. She heads to the Party headquarters – also the site of the commune – to locate him.

Manorama is struck powerfully by the lives of the comrades in the commune – their immersion in meaningful work, their easy camaraderie and, in particular, the self-confidence of the women there. Her first encounter is with a young woman named Paro (a character who might well be based on Parvathi Kumaramangalam). Manorama is astonished at the comfortable banter between Bhushan and Paro, something that she could never imagine between men and women. Paro flings a file at Bhushan's back, complaining that while he is busy chatting with Manorama, she herself has 'been at the machine since eight o clock last night. [. . .] One hundred and seventy-six pages! If you had given them to me a few days earlier!' (187).[42] Bhushan counters: 'You are indeed a witch! You know, it took me four days and two nights to write these pages! And at one o' clock I have to give a report to the [Political Bureau].' Bhushan then introduces the two: 'Manorama, our comrade from Lahore' and 'Paro, the fish from the shores of Madras.' Paro gives Manorama the red salute and Manorama, excited and drawn in by the gesture, replies in kind. She is fascinated by Paro's appearance: 'her darkish complexion, the exhaustion on her face, her large eyes red with lack of sleep, her untidy curly hair. She did not seem concerned that her sari was disarrayed'. This kind of careless beauty is not the aesthetic code in her circles. When Bhushan asks Paro, indicating Manorama, 'aren't our girls from Punjab beautiful?' Paro retorts, 'Can they can type continuously for fifteen hours?' Bhushan assures her that they can do so for

double that time, whereupon Paro announces that she 'will do more. I am a Stakhanovite' (an exceptionally productive Soviet worker) (188).[43] Manorama takes continual notice of the commune's easy camaraderie. Its atmosphere appears to her to be one of 'calm satisfaction. At bare tables people worked out of their own desire and with enthusiasm. [. . .] Here people are so happy. Paro is so self-reliant and enthusiastic'.

Bhushan invites Manorama to lunch, telling her, 'In all of Bombay you won't find as good a lunch for so little money as is served in our commune. [. . .] Wait, if I don't alert Mai, she will scold me' (189). Later in the novel, Bhushan fears Mai will scold him if he does not return for dinner without informing her: 'Ok, so what? I will take the scolding. She's always scolding' (196). Mai's scolding ways are thus registered not just in Joshi's obituary but also in this novel.[44] Manorama sees a dining room full of

> conversation, laughter and noise as when students feel carefree during a break in college. Every place filled up. There were still lots of people remaining to be seated. Mai, a middle-aged woman, was standing like an invigilator. She said, 'Now rest of the comrades next time.' There were six or seven young women among thirty or forty youths, but no shyness or discomposure on their part.
>
> (189)

As they wait for the next seating, Paro comes in and Manorama observes her ongoing banter with Bhushan, which lifts her 'wilting spirits' but also leads her to presume that the two are lovers. As in his *Dada Kamred,* Yashpal indicates the difference between bourgeois and revolutionary gender relations by charting the reactions of a genteel woman to the easy conversations between revolutionary men and women.

Bhushan has alerted Manorama that they might see Joshi though, his meals are generally sent to his room. And sure enough, there emerges

> a short individual, wearing loose khaki shorts and shirts. And slanted (*michmichi*) eyes in thick spectacles; Two days' stubble on his face. Even in her sadness, Manorama was curious to see this person who had become the centre of the entire Party.
>
> (190)

Joshi is portrayed as a hospitable and sensitive individual; he offers to wash Manorama's lunch plate, and questions her closely about her life and presence in Bombay. It is because of his probing that Bhushan learns that Manorama is now married. Noting his surprise, Joshi jokes, 'Don't you know, the Party interferes in its members' marriages?' (191). Thus, Yashpal deftly delineates not only the paternal attitude, but also the camaraderie and charm with which Joshi is believed to have dealt with young women.

Dwelling in the commune rapidly becomes Manorama's goal. Bhushan allays Manorama's fears that he has a relationship with Paro: 'That witch? She must be writing a letter to her lover Venkata. Their wedding date has been decided twice, but

he doesn't get leave and is stuck in Travancore.' Manorama bitterly remembers that Bhushan used to spurn the very idea of marriage for revolutionaries, and upon hearing about Paro and Venkata's plans, she cannot resist a taunt: 'What? Do communists marry? [. . .] Is that the new party line?' Choosing to disregard the implication, Bhushan pontificates:

> You are joking, but for communists, revolution is not a short-term program like the Congress's struggle for freedom; they can't pledge that they will only marry, or eat salt, or wear shoes when it is over. As far as its possible to be faithful to struggle and revolution throughout one's life, it's important to make one's everyday existence healthy and natural.
>
> (195)

In other words, a romantic and sexual relationship is permitted to a good communist.

Manorama now begins to fantasize about the commune as both an avenue of escape from her life with Sootlivala and as an opportunity to live among people with whom she 'share[s] ideas and values'. Bhushan tells her that the commune is full of women for whom ordinary life was untenable. He gives the examples of Mangalam (another woman in the commune) and Paro, who both 'spurned their inheritance and started working for the Party. It's because of such examples that Sakina and her husband parted' (206). The novel suggests that the commune, where Bhushan has seen rich women like Paro effectively declass themselves, has transformed his views about the stranglehold of class upon the individual. Manorama herself has stepped outside the protection of her class. For any woman, such protection is conditional on her remaining within the patriarchal family. As it turns out, her conventional bourgeois marriage also offers no protection, for, shortly after her exchange with Bhushan, her husband Sootlivala attempts to pimp her to his business partner. Manorama is particularly distraught because she married this man of her own free will, alienating her own family and the security they might have offered.

For the rest of the novel, the contradictions within Manorama – her desire to break free of conventions coupled with her inability to actually do so – critically mediate her relationship with communism, as well as with the physical and emotional spaces commune life makes available. She is desperate to escape cohabitation with Sootlivala: 'But where will I go? There is no place for me in the commune.' As Bhushan has reminded her, the Bombay commune is reserved for Party workers who have already established themselves in their districts. Manorama, who was not even a Party member in Lahore, cannot join it immediately – not even Joshi can bend the rules for her sake (206). But as her marital woes intensify, so does her desire for life in the Party. On Bhushan's advice, she starts working with the Bombay Party, in the hope of being able eventually to move to the central headquarters eventually. She is assigned to Friends of the Soviet Union, an organization under the supervision of Comrade Nita, a woman who, in contrast with the men in the commune, has strong and uncompromising views about a woman's right to independence, and to divorce.

Nita, who lives in Red Flag Hall with her comrade husband Vasekar, combines a fiery temperament with a proto-feminist sensibility. She is an exacting taskmaster, 'like the ring-master with a hunter who handles elephants in the circus [. . .] the hunter cracked if there was the slightest shortcoming or lapse from perfection' (206). Although she roundly scolds Manorama when the latter doesn't show up for work, she is also perceptive enough to notice that Manorama appears agitated, and caring enough to insist on learning about the problem. Nita is furious with Sootlivala, out of her *mamta* (maternal love) for Manorama (208). This is an unconventional word to use in relation to female friendship, especially given the way Nita is otherwise represented. It is precise, however, in that it indicates an unusual form of maternal sympathy, one which emanates from an unconventional woman, and demands non-conformist actions from its recipient. Amrit Rai's novel *Beej*, which I discussed briefly in my Introduction, also features a communist woman who counsels and supports another woman betrayed by a man. The hostility of middle-class men to communist women stemmed from a perception that these women were unafraid of counselling other women to take unorthodox positions vis-à-vis the family and domesticity when necessary.

When Manorama tells her that she married Sootliwala out of an impatient desire to escape her family, Nita responds with both irritation and generosity:

> This is what *should* happen to girls like you. You should have fought the injustice of your family. [. . .] You should get a divorce and live your life with honesty and respect. You should live with me in this house, I will see who bothers you.
>
> (Yashpal 208–9; emphasis mine)

Yashpal indicates just how revolutionary such a statement was by contrasting it to the reactions of the communist men. Vasekar says that there is always a lot of trouble in a divorce case, for which only three proper grounds exist – male adultery, impotence or cruelty. When Manorama indicates that she will not be able to stand up in court and talk about such intimate matters, Nita explodes:

> 'Who can then save you?' [. . .] Because of Nita's anger, the news of Manorama's circumstances spread in party circles. Manorama shrank in bashful shame. In Nita's eyes this bashfulness was a measure of the hypocrisy of capitalist culture. She continued to emphasize that Manorama should obtain her freedom from this filth.
>
> (209)

In contrast, Bhushan advises Manorama not to act on impulse. It is possible, he thinks, that she will be able to free herself without the 'unpleasantness' of appearing in court: 'I don't want it to appear in bold letters in the newspapers that a communist woman divorced her impotent husband' (210).

Manushya ke Roop captures the stench of scandal that emanated from divorce, even in Party circles. It was not until 1954 that Indian law allowed for divorce by mutual

consent. When the Indian Parliament debated the provision on May 20 of that year, communist parliamentarian Renu Chakarvartty made a passionate plea for it, countering the outcry that such a provision would be 'misused' and that women would ask for divorce without any serious reason. She argued that such a suggestion, voiced by 'my male friends' was 'demeaning' to women:

> you want a person to be a *sati* by locking her up and putting a big tala [lock] on the door of your house before you leave it. [. . .] That is the chastity of a prisoner and not the chastity which comes as a result of mutual trust. [. . .] Let us think of the society in which we live. Women discarded, women dependent, women humiliated, that is the type of society [. . .] for which we have to legislate.
>
> (quoted in Chakravartty and Chotani 121)[45]

While the Special Marriages Act of 1954 changed the *legal* provisions for divorce, social attitudes to it remained stubbornly conservative. *Manushya Ke Roop* captures the traumatic experience divorce could be for women. When the case begins, it is like 'death' for Manorama to appear in court: we learn that 'She was dying of shame' (Yashpal 274).

Ultimately, the divorce goes through, but only Nita is jubilant: 'In accordance with her temperament, upon hearing the verdict, she congratulated Manorama for obtaining her freedom.' She takes Manorama straight to the Party office, 'holding her as if she was taking a new bride for a "ghar-pravesh" [the ceremonial entry of a bride into her new home]' (275). Although this act radically inverts the meanings of marriage and divorce, as well as suggesting that the Party is more important than a husband, Yashpal reminds us that in a culture where marriage was near-mandatory for women, divorced women were always apt to be seen as sexually available, and it is no different in the commune. As soon as the divorce comes through, 'Party comrades ask, now what? One of them makes a gesture of lovelorn-ness. Another says, at least someone can hope now. A third says, there will be a *swayamvara* now' (275).[46] But the Party does come to Manorama's rescue in a very practical sense, as P. C. Joshi decrees that she can now live in the Andheri Commune with the women of the drama troupe. When Nita informs Joshi that Manorama wants to spurn the maintenance awarded her by the court, Joshi pronounces that her desire is 'irrelevant. The party will have to give her 40 rupees a month as wages. Her income will be the Party's' (276).

Now Manorama and Bhushan are free to see each other. But, although they increasingly spend more time together, they cannot imagine a future together. They are up against an ethos that reserves romance for young people, rather than for divorced women and comrades with seniority:

> No one said anything, but it made her very self-conscious. It's not as if there was not romance between party comrades. Comrades were expecting to celebrate the marriage of Paro and Venkata. Ramesh and Sumiti were also in love, everyone knew that. Bhushan and Manorama also felt pleased talking about these couples, but it was a different matter for young men and women.

> Manorama was the assistant secretary of her paper and Bhushan was also viewed as a senior comrade. They could not create a situation of such tomfoolery ['parihas']. It was okay to give the party information and marry. But marrying just after a divorce did not seem okay.
>
> (283)

A series of dramatic events in the novel's last section overturns this stasis. Soma's husband Dhansingh returns after many years. Manorama, still wedded to her ideal of romantic coupledom, insists that Bhushan try and locate Soma and reunite her and Dhansingh. But when Bhushan finds Soma, she refuses to recognize any of them. Now a major film star, she has turned her back on her past. In a confrontation, her handlers fatally wound Bhushan, who dies in hospital. Racked with guilt because she is the one who had asked Bhushan to intervene, a tortured Manorama moves towards a second-floor corridor in the hospital – a suggestion that she might leap to her death. But P. C. Joshi stops her and says, 'Comrade, you have to stay alive for a bigger task than this' (314).

If, on the one hand, the Party makes it possible for Manorama to imagine another home, an alternative personal life, now it must also remind her that she has a political life, too – one capable of compensating her, at least somewhat, for her loss. The novel ends by observing that Party leaders are annoyed that Bhushan acted without consulting them, particularly as anti-communist newspapers spread the gossip that the communist Bhushan has died after a fracas in an actress's house. Bhushan, the disciplined comrade who wanted to shield the Party from any charges of impropriety, ends up becoming the cause of public scandal.

Yashpal dedicated *Manushya Ke Roop* 'to those comrades who are sacrificing themselves and dedicating their whole being in trying to transform abnormal kinds of humanity into its natural form'. Through the stories of Soma and Manorama, the novel suggests that, as long as women's relationships with the world are mediated primarily by their relationships with men, they cannot inhabit any class position with dignity and emancipation. It also warns against a naïve valorisation of the subaltern subject – namely Soma, who begins amid poverty and exploitation at the hands of her in-laws, learns the ways of the upper classes, and uses their sexual mores to her own advantage. Soma navigates her way into fame and riches, the world of Sootlivala and his cronies, where Manorama is humiliated. If Soma wants not to be reminded of those who helped her escape rural impoverishment, Manorama finds refuge and purpose (and for a brief while love), in the Party. Although Yashpal was to critique the gendered norms of the Party in other writings, including his novel *Geeta*, here he explores how communes in particular allowed men and women to experience new forms of community. They were spaces where the personal and the political intermeshed, in ways that could be both liberating and oddly restrictive.

*

Yashpal's novel describes one very particular milieu. But, as I have indicated in this chapter, there was no single type of commune, nor even a uniform Party culture. The

conservatism that Yashpal critiques when he describes Bhushan's attitudes to divorce were not shared by everyone. Even in areas that were far more traditional than Bombay or Punjab, the Party often encouraged divorce when women were exploited within their marriages, and enabled remarriage for divorced women (Stree Shakti Sanghatana 191, 262). In Andhra for example, Telangana activist Brij Rani Gour even remarried without getting a legal divorce after she ran away from her first husband who ill-treated her. She recalls her marriage to CPI leader Raj Bahadur Gour: his 'parents knew that I was already married, but they didn't say anything. Anyway, the situation was such that I took permission from the Party, but where was the chance to take permission from anyone else?' (201). For Brij Rani, the Party was the arbiter of their morality:

> we did not discuss man–woman relations, but we never did anything without the Party's permission. [. . .] Some [comrades] may have had relations with others, or had relations before marriage. But the Party never agreed to that. Only those who left their wives got permission to marry again from the Party. There was no possibility for those who still had wives.
>
> (205)[47]

(As Chapter 6 will discuss, though, this was not quite true, as male comrades did practise bigamy.) It is clear that for Brij Rani, rebellion against parental authority was justified by obedience to the Party: 'We have to take the Party criticism and not just parents' [criticism]. Should we not abide by party discipline?' (206).

Although women were still doing the bulk of the domestic labour in underground dens and communes, men not only helped them but often became tender care-givers themselves. For instance, Telangana activist Kondapally Koteswaramma describes the situation in an underground den when she bled uncontrollably after an abortion mandated by the Party;

> We could not afford to have our neighbours notice us, so I couldn't wash my blood-stained clothes and dry them outside. We did not have indoor bathrooms and lavatories back then. We bathed in makeshift bathrooms. I did not have the energy to walk to those bathrooms either. Narsimha Rao used to take care of the sanitation. I must salute him for what he did for me. [. . .] Perhaps the news about my health spread, for no comrade visited us during the next four days. Narsimha Rao took care of everything. In those days Party comrades did anything and everything imaginable or unimaginable for the sake of the Party and security, without fear or disgust.
>
> (Koteswaramma 33)

Their relationship became distinctly sisterly – at least, as the traditional Indian family defines sisterhood – as they proceeded to make sacrifices together for the sake of the others:

> I had to take care of the cooking (for the visitors) as well as the household work. It was tiring. Narsimha Rao helped me with cleaning the house and washing

> the utensils. When the food was insufficient, he would eat less than usual and suggest that we share whatever was left over.

Another comrade 'expressed anguish' that Koteswaramma did not ask him to help but, as Koteswaramma explains, 'I did not have that sort of intimacy with him.' (36).

Many communes broke up when the Party was banned in 1948, even though some of them were formed again. In Delhi, Sarla Sharma told me, one

> commune lasted till 1954. It was disbanded because the landlord said he had retired and needed the place. [. . .] Where would people go? Many went into the Party office near Jama Masjid. Others went to relatives. I declined to come to my family. My husband and I had to rent a tiny room, blackened with soot, in Bhagirath Place.
>
> (Sharma; Personal Interview)

Not all communists approved of the idea of communes: Sunil Janah remembers

> Rajani Palme Dutt, the British communist, seeing that all of us were 'whole-timers' for the Party, with no jobs to earn our living, and that we were being fed and housed in the commune, exclaiming in horror that surely this was akin to practicing some kind of 'primitive communism'!
>
> (Janah 35)

Later, Joshi himself worried that the commune would isolate its inhabitants from the ordinary mass of people, and also 'become like machines without any human touch.' But the commune had left an indelible mark on Joshi, as it did on others. In the years to come, his own family life was far from ideal; in 1973, he wrote: 'My family is alright but each lives his own life. I am a misfit. I cannot get out of my commune habits' (quoted in Chakravartty, *Joshi* 118). Many women felt the same way. Telangana activist Sugannana, who, as mentioned earlier, was shocked by the behaviour of some comrades, nevertheless found communal life more to her taste than the family she had left to join the movement. When the struggle was called off, she was ready to 'go anywhere the Party sent me' – or, rather, almost anywhere: 'I wouldn't go home; that was not possible. [. . .] Even getting arrested and going to jail seemed better than going home. I would not return to a home and family' (Stree Shakti Sanghatana 90).

Notes

1 Even outside prison they had begun to read books that oriented them towards developments in Russia. See Dutta Gupta (174 n. 76).
2 G. D. H. Cole, C. E. M. Joad, and G. B. Shaw. Cole and Shaw were Fabian socialists and Joad was a rationalist who later espoused a belief in the inferiority of women. He also believed that sexual desire distracted men from more noble pursuits.
3 I am deeply indebted to Dutta Gupta's analysis of both journals in Chapters 3 and 4 of *Identities and Histories*.

4 For Leela Roy, founding editor of *Jayshree* and the first woman to join a revolutionary group, it was more important to facilitate women's entry into public and political participation than to attempt to wrest male-controlled bastions 'by storm' (quoted in Dutta Gupta 121). Dutta Gupta traces how over time, *Jayshree* moved towards a liberal-socialist position. She shows how the debates in the journal exemplify the dangers of a feminist position that confines itself to 'women's issues' (those limited to domesticity) only.
5 Although, as Sarmistha Dutta Gupta observes, these women 'never retreated into the domestic sphere' (60).
6 See also Manjapra.
7 Manjapra writes:

> The realm of intimacy, affection and sexuality become a main focal point of Roy's political reflections in prison. We often think of the revolutionary in terms of bombs, guns, public action, mass mobilizations and political spectacles. We have long been familiar with depictions of revolutionaries as angry young men. But if a ground of revolutionary action is indeed the realm of the intimate, then this encourages us to grasp the relationship between private and public action in a different way, and to go beyond the masculinist gendering of 'revolution'.
>
> (181)

8 Rose also comments that for Luxemburg, 'passion – like politics – was a question of freedom' (9).
9 Kollontai cautioned that although 'a frequent change of partners by no means signifies sexual intemperance', too many partners would impair a woman's 'ability to have children' and drain a man's strength (229).
10 See, for example, Shannon.
11 'Vasya had come to realize that the woman really meant very little to Volodya, no more, as he put it, 'than a glass of vodka, something to drink and forget', (Kollontai, 'Vasilisa Malygina' 57).
12 At the end of the story, Zhenia says that while she has never been in love with a man, she *does* know what it is to love deeply. It is her love for her mother anchors her being, whereas both her mother and her grandmother had found that anchor in men.
13 For different assessments of Kollontai see Cathy Porter's introduction to *The Love of Worker Bees*; Clements; Lokaneeta; and Marik, *Discourses*.
14 See, for example, Begum (145–46).
15 As already mentioned, such praise was part of women's journals such as *Jayshree* and *Mandira*. Renu Chakravartty writes that

> The victory of Stalingrad was a turning point not only for the Soviet Union but also for India. We read with bated breath and admiration of women like Olga Kovalova, a heroic steel worker who gave her life in this battle. [. . .] We women in India were inspired by these heroic women, some of them just young girls. In our meetings, we spoke of them and pleaded that if they could be so courageous, why not we Indian women?
>
> (19)

The story of Tanya, a Russian girl hanged by Germans, was enacted in several places. It was turned into a play by Sarla Sharma who acted as Tanya herself, and claimed that between twenty-five and thirty thousand people came to see it in Delhi (Interviews with me and with Usha Prasad for the NMML).
16 Thus, Prabhat Patnaik, in an obituary on Ali Ashraf, laments that Ashraf never wrote down his account of the commune. He concludes:

> But he was not too keen, always saying that he would rather write in Urdu or Hindi than in English. There was no doubt a further reason behind his refusal which he was

> too polite to mention: he would rather get on with more important intellectual activity than merely penning down reminiscences.
>
> (Patnaik 91)

17 I am grateful to Vikrant Dadawala for alerting me to this passage in an unpublished essay.
18 Janah, for his part, writes: 'The party headquarters in Bombay had in it all the polyglot diversity of the country. The men and women working in it belonged to all the provinces, and others came and went back in connection with party work all the time' (25).
19 According to A. S. R. Chari, 'All of them were impressed with the modest and simple life and spirit of dedication animating all those who worked in the commune' (106).
20 See also Gyan Prakash, *Mumbai Fables*, 137. Pilly Wadia was wife of photographer D. R. D. Wadia. Chari writes that the couple often came to the commune and gave material help (108).
21 Government of India, 'Communist Survey' April–June 1943, NAI Home Poll, F 7/ 23/ 1943, 10.
22 Government of India, 'Communist Survey (April–June 1943),' NAI Home Poll F. 7/ 23/ 1943. The smell of urine is remarked on by several others, including historian Rajnarayan Chandavarkar in this rather hostile comment: 'The smell of urine that pervaded the building (the Party commune in Sandhurst Road) made the communist gentry feel especially high-minded and self-conscious about the righteousness of their cause, the seriousness of their struggle, the purity of their beliefs and the gravity of their sacrifice' (26).
23 Janah recalls that 'the Party paid our living expenses, and gave us a "Party wage" of twenty-five rupees a month (about six US dollars, circa 1943) as pocket money, which went towards occasional bus fares and cheap packets of Charminar cigarettes' (10).
24 Sarla Sharma told me that in the late 1940s in Delhi, the wage was 30 rupees, out of which 25 were given back for food.
25 ARP was Air Raid Precautions, an organization set up in Britain and in India during the Second World War.
26 I am grateful to Vikrant Dadawala for this reference.
27 I am grateful to Tanika Sarkar for this reference.
28 Among some communities, the ideal groom for a girl is her mother's brother.
29 Dr. Acchamamba had joined the CPI in 1940, and fought Assembly elections in 1946 from the Eluru constituency (she lost).
30 These are the words of Renu Chakravartty.
31 *People's Age*, April 7, 1946, 9.
32 I am using an unpublished translation by Pradip K. Datta. Page numbers refer to the original Bengali publication.
33 Chari's memory seems flawed for the 1964 film *Zindagi* contains no such song, although a 1941 film *Sikandar* does. Lalit grew up to be a lawyer, like his father, and wrote a memoir of his own recounting those early years, but I have not been able to trace more than this snippet from it:

> There must have been a lot of political talk at home, but I cannot honestly remember any. But by the time I was five or six I certainly knew about Congress and its leaders, particularly Gandhiji and Nehru. I had been taken to Chowpatty to see Subhash Chandra Bose address a monster meeting and had seen Khan Abdul Gafar Khan leading a vast procession of his 'Redshirts' along Lamington Road. I had also become aware of the Communists and the Soviet Union, of Marx, Lenin and Stalin. I had been taken to several workers' meetings at Chowpatty.
>
> ('But the Mountains Will Remain')

34 A. J. Wadia paid for Lalit's education, as Chari points out in his memoirs.
35 Shabana Azmi has also commented on her early life. See, for example, Ashok Chatterjee.
36 Lenin writes:

> workers, average people of the masses, are capable of displaying enormous energy and self-sacrifice in strikes and in street-battles with the police and the troops, and are

> capable (in fact, are alone capable) of *determining* the outcome of our entire movement – but the struggle against the *political* police requires special qualities; it requires *professional* revolutionaries.

37 See, for example, the discussion in Frölich (83–89). For Bhagat Singh's draft, see Chapter 2.
38 Kollontai continues:

> The workers' state needs new relations between the sexes, just as the narrow and exclusive affection of the mother for her own children must expand until it extends to all the children of the great, proletarian family, the indissoluble marriage based on the servitude of women is replaced by a free union of two equal members of the workers' state who are united by love and mutual respect. In place of the individual and egoistic family, a great universal family of workers will develop, in which all the workers, men and women, will above all be comrades.

39 Soma Marik notes that Kollontai imagined women as a collectivity taking on domestic work and freeing the individual woman from it.
40 At least four Telangana women recalled this. See Stree Shakti Sanghatana (73, 95, 129, 230).
41 See also Koteswaramma (145).
42 All translations from this book are mine.
43 The Stakhnovite movement began in 1935, during the Soviet second-year plan. It marked a new stage of socialist competition; the name derived from a worker who had mined 102 tons of coal in five hours, 14 times his quota. Paro's usage testifies to its use among Party workers in India at the time.
44 In Kitty Menon's memory, the woman who was 'always scolding' was Mai's daughter Leila; while it's possible that Kitty mistook daughter for mother, or that Leila did step in for the latter, what is noteworthy here is how the image of a maternal scold who runs the commune cuts across different types of narratives.
45 Chakravartty also discusses how it was also only through persistent efforts by communist and other progressive women that civil marriages (i.e. marriages not performed under any religious dispensation) were allowed.
46 *Swayamvara* literally means self-chosen partner, and refers to the legendary practice of a woman selecting her groom from an assembly of suitors.
47 See Chapter 6 for Usha Verma's story.

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4

THE POLITICAL IS PERSONAL

Not far from the Bombay Commune was a world that was both connected to, and far removed from it: Girangaon, or the textile mill district in Bombay, in which a very different kind of female revolutionary was honed from the late 1920s onwards. Protests by Bombay's mill workers had been escalating. Between October 1928 and April 1929 there were more than 70 strikes, and these actions gave birth to trade unions and labour organizations in Girangaon (Menon and Adarkar 154–55).[1] The 1928 strike was the first action in which Communist Party cadres, led by the charismatic (and controversial) trade union leader S. A. Dange, emerged as undisputed leaders of the mill workers. This led to the establishment of the Girni Kamgar Union (GKU), also known as Lal Bawta (Red Flag), the first union to organize women. Ushabai Dange and Parvatibai Bhore were among the women who emerged as leaders and organizers of the Union. Labour and feminist historians have noted their importance to various mill actions but have not engaged with the autobiographies of these two women. These are important documents in themselves, particularly because we do not have many accounts of women labour organizers from that period. Indeed, it is particularly remarkable that they were written at all, because neither woman was highly educated, nor thought of herself as extraordinary and important. What makes these books especially valuable is that both Ushabai and Parvatibai frankly detail the cross-hatching of their intimacies – love, cohabitation, child-rearing, and familial relations – with their political consciousness and the class dynamics within the trade unions and Communist Party.

The two women knew each other – Parvatibai felt enabled by watching Ushabai in action – and they and felt a kinship with one another. Both were acutely self-conscious about their difference from the better-educated and more cosmopolitan women within the CPI. At the same time, the two were far from identical. Ushabai hailed from a Brahmin family, whereas Parvatibai came from the low *nai* (barber) caste. Ushabai's life was shaped by her marriage to S.A. Dange, the trade union leader,

while Parvatibai's was a constant attempt to escape her marriage to a spouse who had no political engagement at all. Ushabai felt that her domesticity was fraught because it was too enmeshed with the Communist Party, while Parvatibai's was fractious because it was too far removed from the political world to which she belonged. Thus, their lives took contrasting paths towards the same arena of public engagement. As this chapter will show, each imbibed communism in a very different fashion, and communism also impelled them to inhabit marriage and motherhood in divergent, almost opposite, ways.

*

The early pages of Ushabai Dange's autobiography, *Pan Aikta Kaun* (Who Listens to Me) shares much with the narratives of the first generation of Maharashtrian social activists, but it also dramatically departs from their concerns.[2] Ushabai recounts her dramatic journey from child widow to a leader of workers in Bombay's textile mills, dwelling on her marriage, motherhood, her desires, and fears. While several accounts of the women's movement in India refer to this book in order to extoll Ushabai's remarkable political work, they are silent about its frank and extended discussion of the personal costs to her life, and the difficulties and despair it often entailed. Most important, as the title of the book indicates, Ushabai does not shrink from talking about how difficult it was for her, as an uneducated and unsophisticated person, to be heard by Party comrades and her husband. Too often the mundane and everyday hardships of the political life are ignored in India where so much activism, whether feminist or communist, is enabled by a comfortable middle-class existence. As some activists have noted, Ushabai's book is remarkable because it reminds us that we need to acknowledge the costs of political commitment.[3]

Ushabai (widely called 'Tai' or aunt by comrades) was born in 1898 in a fairly well-off family in a village in Colaba district of Bombay. Her father, she writes, was not fond of her, but she was adored by her mother and grandparents. Upon her father's death, life changed for the worse. According to custom, her mother was shorn, and relegated to the outhouse where she had to live wearing the red sari that marked widowhood in their community. When her grandparents also died, Ushabai's uncle (her father's younger brother) became the head of the family. Ushabai continued to go to school on a scholarship of 30 rupees a month, and loved it. When she brought her school books to show her mother, her mother would tear up and embrace her. But Ushabai's aunt was not fond of her, and treated her so shabbily that Ushabai did not object when the family arranged her marriage to one Vinayak Vishnu Aglave of Kalyan Shehar.

Marriage turned out to be no escape from domestic harassment. Ushabai writes that her mother-in-law was worse than her aunt had been. She regarded Ushabai as 'inauspicious' for the family because shortly after the marriage, something had gone wrong for her husband in his job. Ushabai was made to do all the work in the house, fetch water from a well (25 buckets in the morning and 25 in the evening), wash the family's clothes, and cook their food. To discredit the new bride, her mother-in-law

would add extra salt to what she had cooked. She was given stale food to eat – perfectly good food was made to go stale before she was allowed to eat it. Sometimes Ushabai's mother-in-law would beat her with a stick:

> My feet still carry those marks [. . ..] One night I was made to stand the whole night holding my big toes with my fingers. [. . .] It was not possible for me to read books. My mother in law would abuse me. All my jewellery was pawned. Only my chacha (uncle) knew of my woes. I never told even my mother all this. But when I went home, before I left she would hug me and cry. Perhaps she knew everything despite my not telling her.
>
> (*Pan Aikta Kaun* 9)[4]

In 1918, Ushabai gave birth to a girl, and the 'atrocities' against her did not abate. Her husband became sick and died. Clearly, he was sympathetic to Ushabai's situation: 'the last time he called me to him, I was crying. He said don't cry. You will find a better man than me as husband. Your life will be successful'. Three days after his death, Ushabai writes, 'my daughter died of the same illness as him. An avalanche of sorrow broke upon me' (10). Thirteen days later, Ushabai was asked to shave her head as was customary for widows. She refused, and her mother and uncle backed her. She was enjoined 'to live like a widow is customarily supposed to live', and to serve as a servant to a *swamiji* who used to come to the house. Ushabai refused, but in the face of so much deprivation, felt utterly desolate:

> I was twenty years old. My future was dark. Like so many child widows in Hindustan, my life was practically over. I was alive because I was in Bombay. If I had been in some small village or in the countryside I would have died.
>
> (11)

However, slowly, very slowly, circumstances began to change. Ushabai's maternal family moved to Girangaon in Bombay. There she found a friend, Chhabu, a child widow like herself: 'Because both of us experienced the same pain a deep friendship developed between us' (11). As a result, the girls' families also became acquainted, and Chhabu's father and brother took to visiting Ushabai's family. This brother was S. A. Dange. It took Ushabai some time to start talking to this man whom everyone called Bagya. He did not believe in caste, and was a passionate devotee of Congress leader Balgangadhar Tilak: he 'used to create trouble at the meetings of those leaders who did not agree with Tilak' (13). Ushabai's description of Dange suggests the impact he had on her: 'The first love of this black haired, big eyed, clean white dhoti-wearing, twenty-year old was politics. Along with his friends he also brought out a political magazine' (13). When Tilak died in 1920,

> Dange took Chhabu and me to view the body. [. . .] At night [when] Dange returned home; he cried a lot. He brought a smidgeon of Tilak's ashes with

> him, which he placed in a silver box. This facet of his personality touched my heart.
>
> (14)

The next year, Dange turned to Marxism, writing his first important political tract, entitled *Gandhi versus Lenin*; the process of writing the book made him transition from a Congressman to a Marxist.[5] Ushabai recognized that 'He was against Gandhiji's path. I and Chachaji [uncle] used to spin. Then Dange used to tease us and make fun of us' (16). But it was not until much later that she began to engage with Dange's Marxist views.

Ushabai's account reminds us that life and health could be precarious for ordinary Indians, even those who were middle class and urban. Dange's father and 4-year-old step-sister died, and only he and Chhabu were left in the family. Shortly after, Usha also fell very ill. Dange would come regularly to her bedside, and she recovered, but very slowly. Then, the dynamic was reversed because Dange and his sister both fell sick. Chhabu was diagnosed as having tuberculosis and was taken off by a friend of the family's to be nursed. Dange, Ushabai writes:

> was brought to our house. He used to have 102 degree fever. I used to keep an icepack on his forehead all night. That's when we became very close. Then he improved and returned home. But he used to come every day to meet me and my mother. [. . .] He would tell my mother, my uncle and my brother that they should prevent me from ruining my life. He believed I should study.
>
> (18)

Chhabu's health worsened. She summoned Ushabai and handed her some jewellery she had, saying, 'Please get Bagya married and give it to his future wife. I said yes. And soon after she died' (18). But Dange sold the jewellery to start a paper called *The Socialist* (the first socialist paper in India) and then to buy a printing press. He also continued to insist on the necessity of Ushabai's education. Even when her natal family ultimately agreed, they could not see how it could be done:

> A widow is remaking her life – this was against the customs of the time. It was not acceptable. My mother and brother found a solution. First I should go to my in-laws' house. And to school from there. Then it would be socially acceptable.
>
> (20)

Since conventional wisdom dictated that a woman 'belonged' to her husband and his family, they, rather than her own family, had the right to grant her the freedom to study.

So Ushabai shifted back to her in-laws' place. Every week her mother-in-law would get a letter from a woman named Malatibai extolling Poona's Seva Sadan, a woman's educational institution that was set up by the pioneering social activist

Ramabai Ranade.[6] The students there were mostly widows. It was actually Dange who was writing these letters. Impressed by 'Malatibai's' accounts, her mother-in-law agreed to send Ushabai there, but at the very last minute she inexplicably changed her mind. However, Ushabai had had enough. She ran away to her sister's house where Dange met her with all that she needed to take to Poona. He and another friend escorted Ushabai to her new world. She writes:

> A widow was breaking all social ties to go study. How did I get the courage to do this? Perhaps Bagya's belief in me gave me the strength. [. . .] The belief that education can change one's life had been instilled in me by Bagya. Seva Sadan distanced me from both my in-laws home and my maternal home. For a widow to leave social obligations and take her own path was a crime in those days. I had become a disgrace. My uncle and my brother were angry with me. I knew that my mother wanted me to study. But she couldn't do anything.
>
> (23)

Ushabai reiterates the enormity of these steps, and Dange's pivotal role in helping her take them; she herself could hardly believe that she was walking away from the life that convention decreed for her. During this time, we learn later, Dange would visit her every weekend. After a year in Seva Sadan, he brought Ushabai to Bombay for a short visit; when he directed their tonga (horse carriage) to her uncle's house and pointed out her mother in the distance, she fainted. 'You can judge how nervous and apprehensive I was', she comments (24).

Although so close to Dange, Ushabai says that she had not considered a relationship between them:

> I used to find matches for Bagya but he didn't like any of them. We were good friends, nothing more. One day while we were chatting, he placed his hand on mine. I was very cross and went off to Poona.
>
> (24)

Perhaps she was attracted to him, but it is clear that she could not imagine them marrying. Nevertheless, she suggests that a deep – even preternatural – bond was growing between them. One day in March 1924, she writes,

> I dreamt that the government has arrested Bagya. I awoke and started crying. Indira Deshpande was a friend of mine. I went into her room. She started pacifying me. At three in the afternoon Jogelkar's telegram came . . . Bagya had been arrested by the government! [. . .] This was Bagya's first imprisonment. After this Bagya was to be arrested again and again, and I was to wait for him with worry. This first arrest was known as the 'Bolshevik case.'
>
> (25)[7]

Dange's arrest meant that Ushabai now had no money to pay for her education; on the advice of a friend, who was a nurse in Bombay's King Edward Memorial Hospital, Ushabai moved there, first to study nursing, and then to work as a nurse.

FIGURE 4.1 Young Ushabai Dange

At that time, hardly any 'respectable' married Hindu women were nurses; Ushabai's colleagues were either widows, like herself, or Christians. The Hindu nurses wore saris, and the Christians (as well as the British matron) wore dresses. One day the Dean, Dr. Jivraj Mehta (who later became the first chief minister of Gujarat), sent around an order that all nurses should wear dresses. None of the Hindu women were

> ready to wear frocks. But no one had the guts to go to the Dean about it. In the end, I myself met Dr. Mehta and said to him that we don't like to wear frocks. We will wear only saris. Dr. Mehta was angry but he had to agree. He remained cross with us for many days.
>
> (27)

In later years, nurses in India did have to wear frocks, and they continued to resist, sometimes coming out on strike in protest. Dresses, they said, typecast them as Western and sexually available, a perception that was long underlined by the portrayal of nurses in Indian cinema (Healey 44, 57, 197–98). For Ushabai, nursing both provided solace, a degree of financial independence, and gave her a creed to live by:

> Serving the sick became my faith. I had to learn to forget my tears of sorrow in others' tears of happiness. But I used to think, the person who has given me this strength is locked within prison walls. I used to think: will I ever be able to make him happy?
>
> (*Pan Aikta Kaun* 29)

By this time Ushabai had begun to entertain thoughts of being with Dange. Dange's comrade, Jogekar, 'used to say, let Bagya be released from prison, I will get the two of you married' (29). But she continued to be very conscious of the radical nature of her life:

> I had broken all rules of society. Despite being a widow, I studied, left home, worked as a nurse, lived in a hostel with girlfriends of alien castes and religions, served the sick. All this was against the principles of society. Only Bagya was my support.

She had internalized some of her mother-in-law's superstitions:

> Then it occurred to me, I am an unfortunate. If he marries me, I hope my misfortune does not cast a shadow on him. Only because of this thought I never contemplated marriage. But I was ready to do anything to make him happy.
>
> (29)

Dange's 'happiness' clearly stands in for and legitimizes Ushabai's obvious attraction, and so, after his release from prison, although 'the thought kept recurring – I am a widow, I am unfortunate, and I don't want my misfortune to affect Bagya',

Usha agreed to marry him (32). But so deeply ingrained was her sense that she was doing something highly unusual – and potentially unlucky for her husband – that Ushabai remained uneasy; she was 'scared of putting sindoor' on her forehead, which would advertise her married status. Dange's friends 'had to do the work of reassuring me and giving me confidence'. Her own family's reaction was the opposite. While they had initially supported the idea of her education, they disapproved of her running away to Seva Sadan, and especially of her marrying again, and now, she writes, they

> severed all ties with me. Only my mother was on my side. In 1930, she came secretly to see me. Only once. Then my daughter Roza had been born. She took Rosa on her lap, looked at me and said, 'I am happy you did not continue to suffer like me. Bagya will make your life successful.' At least I am lucky that I got this blessing from my mother.
>
> (33)

In her memoir, after they are married Ushabai refers to Dange as 'D' and not 'Bagya', this shift in nomenclature suggesting both intimacy and a continuing public formality, which is the hallmark of *Pan Aikta Kaun*.

Marriage, however, did not ensure togetherness for the couple, for there were many demands on Dange's time (but there were affective and intellectual compensations, as I show below). Ushabai narrates the story of their 'honeymoon', for which she uses the English word. The day after the wedding, a railway strike began in Kharakpur, at which Dange's presence was necessary. Ushabai says that she felt

> very bad. But D said, silly don't cry. I will write to you every day from there. I kept waiting for those letters. Not one came. When D returned, I was angry. D said, there was no time to write, so every day I used to inscribe a stanza of *Meghdoot* on a postcard and sign it. D knew *Meghdoot* by heart. His situation was like the *virahi* Yaksha. [. . .] Later I came to know that the postbox where he went to mail these did not accept post cards. This was clearly signposted, but in his hurry, he did not read that. All his sights were upon Avanti Nagri.
>
> (33)

In *Meghdoot* (Cloud Messenger), a fifth-century Sanskrit lyric poem by Kalidasa, a Yaksha or divine attendant of Kubera, god of wealth, is exiled for a year from his home, and pines for his bride. He enlists the support of a cloud to carry his messages of love and sorrow to her. Avanti Nagri is another name for Ujjain, Kalidas's hometown. Ushabai, herself hardly schooled, thrilled to step into the world of Sanskrit romance with Dange, who was deeply knowledgeable about classical literature: 'Then I was Usha and he was Aniruddh. We used to write to each other using those names. This unique meeting of my life with Sanskrit drama was a very pleasurable experience for me. Anger and love. Both together' (34). Usha and Anirudha are lovers in the Sanskrit text *Bhagvat Purana*, and their romance is featured in plays in

different Indian languages. There are many variations of the tale, but in all of them Usha dreams of intense lovemaking with a man; she is scared by the force of her vision and draws a picture of this man, whom her friend Chitralekha identifies as Anirudha, Lord Krishna's grandson. In some versions of the story, Chitralekha brings a sleeping Anirudha to Usha's chamber, and when he wakes, a joyful Usha woos him, and his initial anger gives way to acquiescence. Although Ushabai's book suggests that she dared not dream of love at all, this account of her private language with Dange indicates her deep pleasure in such a fantasy, particularly after it had already become a reality.

Only now did Ushabai begin to engage with politics in the formal sense, though we should remember that even her marriage was a deeply political act. It was recognized as such in a world where widow marriage was encouraged by reformers but still relatively rare; moreover, Ushabai had married a communist! She writes that sociologist and novelist S. V. Ketkar 'congratulated D on marrying a widow and afterwards came to our house to meet me, saying that "I want to see who this woman is who has married such a scary man"' (34). But the woman herself had not thus far engaged with Dange's 'scary' ideas:

> My outlook was as limited to what is possible for a Hindu widow. But after marriage I began to meet D's friends and my eyes began to open. A new world was being readied in front of my eyes. Tilak, Gandhi, these were the leaders I knew of until then. But now D's ideas began to feel [as] my own, not simply his. I began to be proud of him. I wanted to learn more about his ideology. Wherever he went, I wanted to go along with him.
>
> (34)

Living with Dange, Ushabai became exposed to routine and daily trade union activities; however, her own political understanding and involvement really grew through an engagement with the experiences of other women.

One formative incident took place in 1928 after a six-month long strike of Bombay mill workers against what were called 'rationalization measures' which led, among other things, to increased workloads and, in particular, the retrenchment of women. Dange decided to use women to picket the mills, the first time women had participated in any such action in India. While newspaper reports claimed that many onlookers and male workers found the idea amusing, Radha Kumar suggests that the pickets had an 'immediate and electrifying effect. [. . .] The year 1928 appears to be when trade unionists awoke to the potential of feminine militancy' (55). It is this action that gave Gandhi the idea of also deploying women to picket liquor shops and other institutions. The mill workers and the British government, writes Ushabai, turned retaliatory after having to acknowledge defeat.[8] Organized attacks on communists followed, including an attempt to kill Dange; workers retaliated by burning down the home of the mill owner's flunkey who was said to be behind the attempt. When hired thugs harassed Papa Miyan, a union leader who worked in Moti Mills, enraged workers beat up the weaving master of the mill, who succumbed to his injuries. A legal case was launched

against Papa Miyan and another leader called Babu Maruti. In December 1928, the two were sentenced to be hanged, an event which made a great impact on Ushabai:

> That day we all were in the High Court. All around armed police stood guard. Upon hearing the sentence. Papa Miyan's wife Begum Avrosh fainted. I took her home. She was pregnant. On eighteenth March, the two leaders were hanged. When she heard, Avrosh screamed, and then gave birth to her baby. I have not been able to forget that scream till this day. That was the scream of the workers' ultimate sacrifice. This was the tradition of those who annihilated themselves for the country's sake.
>
> (*Pan Aikta Kaun* 50)

Ushabai goes on to list various anti-colonial fighters in whose tradition Avrosh can be placed. This genealogy is striking, as is her heartfelt claim that the scream of a worker's wife in labour is the sound of the sacrifice of labouring and militant workers; it casts the strike actions of working class as nationalist, but also, far more unusually, places the delivery pangs of a working-class widow on the same plane as worker' militancy. It is also noteworthy that rather than draw attention to female pickets and other forms of militancy during the 1928 strike, she chooses to focus on an act that is rarely seen as politically significant.

In March 1929, Dange and other communist leaders from Bombay, Calcutta, Lahore, Dhaka, Lucknow, and other places were arrested; they would all be tried for conspiring against the British government in the infamous Meerut Conspiracy Case.[9] All but one member of the Girni Kamgar Union were also arrested. Ushabai reflected that when Dange was previously arrested for conspiracy in 1924,

> I was alone. But today the situation was different. The news of D's arrest had spread like fire all over the city, and the next day lakhs of people collected in Nagu Samaji Wadi, where we lived. Someone yelled, 'Call Baiji'; people started raising slogans 'Call Baiji, call Baiji.' I came out of the house and reached the people. 'Let Baiji speak!' people started calling out. I got nervous. I had no experience of speaking before lakhs of people. 'Speak Baiji. [. . .] Don't be afraid', someone reassured me. 'I am yours. [. . .] Whatever you tell me to do, I will.' I said. People clapped and greeted my promise by shouting D's name. The next day thousands of people came to meet me and support me. They were all workers, women and men. They had faith and belief in D, which they now showered upon me.
>
> (*Pan Aikta Kaun* 51)

According to Hajra Begum, a prominent communist organizer from UP, 'this was the first instance of a woman addressing a protest meeting of workers' (142). Ushabai suggests that she had become a labour leader by virtue of being Dange's wife. Her

words to the workers paralleled the promises that are made during a wedding ceremony by a wife to the husband: 'I am yours. [. . .] Whatever you tell me to do, I will.'[10] In reality, though, she had already been active in the movement. According to labour leader G. V. Chitnis, during the 1928 strike, Ushabai had organized a women's meeting to address male attitudes to female militancy. Apparently, as female pickets were harassed by the police, striking men took to drink and cards instead of defending them, upon which the women 'resolved to march to the *chawls* [workers' tenements] and burn the playing cards, and the following day held a women's demonstration' (Kumar 62).

Two months later, in May 1929, Ushabai gave birth to a baby girl. Dange and his comrades in prison named her Roza, after Rosa Luxemburg. A week after Roza's birth, news reached Ushabai, who was still in hospital, that

> mounted police had attacked striking workers. There was no other way I could see other than joining the workers to picket at the door of the mills. I started going to the *chawls* and speaking in front of workers. Since Roza was born at the time of a strike, she was given the name 'Hartal Wali Bai' (the Girl of the Strike). I had to take her with me to the mills. The women workers used to look after her. Whichever woman was breastfeeding her own child, would feed her when she cried. In this way, several women workers became mothers to her.
>
> (*Pan Aikta Kaun* 54)

Later, at Roza's marriage, these women needed no formal invitation. 'They were the ones who had raised Roza. All of Roza's worker mothers and friends came for the wedding' (223). At every point in her account of her initiation and growth into trade union politics, Ushabai calls attention to her own status as woman, wife, and mother, and celebrates the many women who joined and supported her as they did the men.

In 1929, a total of 40,000 women worked in 84 mills. Their numbers had been steadily declining since 1926. Ushabai describes their situation. Women overseers called 'nayakeen' took a 5-rupee bribe from each woman worker to be given a job, and a rupee every month after that. But they also acted as procuresses, which was particularly abusive:

> On payday, they would roam the mills collecting their money [. . .] they also had to do another horrific job – procuring the young and beautiful among the mill workers for the manager or officers. At that time fifteen-year old girls also worked in mills. Such young girls would have to work from seven in the morning to six in the evening. If they had babies of their own they would dose them with opium and put them to sleep. If they had older children, they would stay at home to look after the younger.
>
> (56)

During this strike, some important demands of the union were met, such as a stop to the activities of these *nayakeens*. The women no longer had to bribe them, and they

also started getting maternity leave. Slowly, women overcame their fear of joining the union; during this strike, Ushabai remembers, many of them came into their own. They joined the strike in large numbers, began to lead it, learnt discipline, and also lost their fear:

> Big 'dadas' (thugs) would fear confronting these stormy women. [. . .] At one place the police had proscribed meetings. They a had arrested the leaders. The police came to attack the strikers with lathis, but the women took out a *morcha* (demonstration). Now a strange scene unfolded. The police began to flee and the women pursued them with umbrellas in their hands. In another place, a white sergeant cocked his pistol at the workers. At one a woman named Seema stepped forward and caught his hand. Seeing this, scores of women leapt upon him and took the pistol from his hands.
>
> (57)

Exhilarating as this might sound, these were tough days for Ushabai. She felt caught between the demands of the workers' struggles and those of motherhood, the latter made particularly hard by Dange's absence: 'In spite of being the mother of a little baby I got neither proper food nor rest. I had only one support and that was from the scores of women workers. They never let me experience aloneness.' The larger collectivity of women workers became her family, but nothing compensated for Dange's absence. She would go to see him in faraway Meerut which was a logistically difficult and expensive proposition. The trial went on for four years and finally Dange was sentenced to prison for 12 years.[11] Ushabai was despondent:

> I felt a mountain had fallen on me. To be sentenced to a British *kala pani* prison. There was no end to trouble in my life. Four years in the Kanpur Case. Four years in this case. And now twelve years of punishment. How could I live? What support did I have? I had no grief for my own worries and difficulties. If D was with me I was ready to face anything. But even that luck was not in my destiny.
>
> (65)

Over the years, Ushabai was to get more deeply involved in union activities, and also to keep suffering Dange's increasingly intolerable absence. As she put it, 'One part of me was stuck at Meerut, the other was getting involved in the lives of the workers' (80). In 1934, during a strike, she herself was arrested: 'Till now I use to visit jail only to meet D but now I was myself in it. Women had faced imprisonment during Congress's satyagraha [. . .] I was proud of being jailed because of my involvement in workers' struggle.' Roza was then five, no longer an infant, and therefore not allowed to accompany Ushabai to jail. The child fell gravely ill, whereupon Ushabai was released on bail and exiled from Bombay (83). The Communist Party and GKU were both banned in 1934, but the ban did nothing to

prevent the union from becoming even stronger among the workers (Menon and Adarkar 164).

Five years later, in 1939, workers from Bitia Mills summoned Ushabai, saying, 'Bai, come quickly, Bitia is closed. The women have created big trouble, and have locked up the owner' (*Pan Aikta Kaun* 157).[12] Ushabai found that 700 women workers were on *dharna* at the mill gates. They had struck work because some women had been sacked (Ushabai does not mention this, but as a result of this dismissal, the workload of the remaining workers had been doubled). When Ruia the owner, refused to meet their demands, the women *gheraoed* him.[13] 'This was', Ushabai reflects, the 'first *gherao* action in the history of Bombay mills. Perhaps in all of India. The day was 11 April 1939' (158). The women decided that Ruia would not be allowed to leave until their demands were met. The Home Minister said the talks with government would take place the next day. The union gave an assurance that Ruia would come to no harm until then. The workers brought food and floor-spreads from their homes. They sent tea to the office workers. Ushabai writes that she then received a phone call from the Ruia's mother who asked, 'Can I send food for my son?' I replied, 'Don't worry about that. He is with us. Whatever we are eating will be shared with him.' The next day the mother told Ushabai and the others,

> 'You people kept my son well, didn't kill him. People had said to me these communists will kill your son.' I said, 'Why would they do that? You are worried about your son. See these women, they sat [at the factory] all night. What must have happened to their children? Did you think about them?'
>
> (160)

The talks failed, and no agreement could be reached. The workers ended the *gherao* and started an indefinite strike, led by Ushabai and Parvatibai Bhore. It lasted for eight months. The management attempted to break it by bringing lorry loads of blacklegs under police escort. Over a thousand women created a blockade. According to Parvatibai Bhore,

> The lorry was full of male workers [strike-breakers]. Ushabai stepped forward and in a very sweet voice said, said to them, 'If you want to kick these women in the stomach do come in.' Hearing these words, the men stepped back. The police were also surprised. They were afraid they would have to fire on us.
>
> (Bhore 65)[14]

Historians have assessed this strike, led by women workers, as a landmark in the history of women's labour activism. By March 1940, the strike had spread to 14 other mills, with women still in the lead. In June that year, the Central Committee of the Communist Party published 'A Diary of The Strike' which extolled their role, in terms that bear some scrutiny, for they tell us that these striking women had to fight on many fronts, including with their own menfolk. The diary chronicled women as

unafraid of their bosses and fearless even in the face of police violence: they 'threatened to squeeze the very life out of the [. . .] manager of Rachel Sassoon Mill; when a police officer beat them with a lathi, they were 'roused [. . .] to frenzy! They surround the police officer and give him the lesson of his lifetime! His buttons wrenched away, he trying to keep his buttons as well as his pants!' (Basu 214–15). We learn that they kept vigil for long hours and did not fear arrest. Then there was the question of the proclivities of their own men:

> The men workers are men all over. A lac [*sic*] and sixty thousand on strike. Why bother about picketing! And who then is going to the mill anyway! So they sit in groups, play cards, smoke bidis and kill time. The brave women to the rescue. They remonstrate with their husbands. Plucky! Deaf masculinity! They complain to the Union. They are hereby empowered in the name of the Union to seize playing cards wherever and whenever found in the hands of the mere male and to produce them at the mass meetings! No sooner said than done. [. . .] After the speeches the big heap of playing cards is given a proper Hindu cremation. Many of the workers were obviously inspired by the daring and resoluteness of the women. Some among the men frowned. They lost their playing cards. Also the silent uncomplaining, ever-yielding wife. The Lal Batva educates!
>
> (Basu 218–19)

It is remarkable that these militant women are repeatedly described as wives rather than workers in their own right. According to this account, the union has taught them to challenge their position *as wives*, rather than to question the dominance of men in the organization or their inaction in the strike action (which is what they were doing). Further, the men's behaviour is understood as the outcome of a traditional masculinity described in a 'boys will be boys' tone. Even as it is questioned, it is clear that traditional femininity must not be entirely lost:

> The women are marvelous. So charming even in their militancy. A woman worker gives the slogan in a high tremolo: 'Lal Bavta Ki Jai.' All the women take it up. Their voices ring out clear and gentle like silver bells. When they clap, how delicate and picturesque! They raise both their hands over their heads and clap. It is an exquisite sight! Thousands of hands going up in perfect unison. A thousand sopranos shouting revolutionary slogans!
>
> (Basu 226)

Thus, even as the Party enabled, supported, and extolled women's activism, there was a tendency to cast them in a supporting, and in the passage above, even decorative, role. What of women leaders? Not much is different, for Ushabai is only ever mentioned as Dange's wife in the Party reports and documents.

Women did more than picket and march; they also spearheaded efforts to collect money and supply food for the strikers, and to draw more women into the

movement. Workers in the city and people in nearby *chawls* gave money to support the strikers, but, as we will see in the next section, Parvatibai found that middle-class people were reluctant to do so. Ahilya Rangnekar, Party and trade union leader B. T. Ranadive's younger sister, who was active in both the trade union and women's movements, recalls that

> We used to sing in front of the mill gates. Like 'Lift high the flag of revolt, the blood red flag steeped in our blood.' [. . .] And workers would gather and listen. We also sang songs addressed to the women, '[. . .] my son Raghu has to go to school, but he has no clothes to wear, and he is cold, my hunger is a reminder of the red flag'. This appealed to the workers. We would exhort the women, 'See, your saree is torn, but the owner's daughter, look at the clothes she wears.'
>
> We demanded equal wages for the women and for women to be taken in the winding department. After that they were taken in the winding department, but they were never taken in the weaving department.
>
> (Menon and Adarkar 159)

Ushabai describes some of the ways devised by the union to reach women workers effectively – she and other leaders would go to their neighbourhoods, and beat upon a metal dinner plate to summon them to meetings that 'never lasted more than half an hour. Then women went back to their work. We never gave long speeches; women didn't have the time for those. These quick meetings proved very effective' (*Pan Aikta Kaun* 163). The practical, everyday metal dinner plate that mobilizes women's community and action is particularly apt and moving.

In an act of solidarity, Ushabai also notes the importance of the work done by common Party members. She pays tribute to Jivba, a long-time worker of the union and the Communist Party, who used to accompany them, help summon the women, and offer sundry help of all sorts.

> If any campaign or movement does not have a person like Jivba, it can never work. But such people are not recognized. In our organization the situation was, and still remains, that very few people really care about comrades like Jivba at a personal level. Most people will inquire, has Jivba brought the chairs and flags, but few will ask, has he eaten today?
>
> (163–64)

Her concern for the personal welfare of comrades stemmed from her own constant sense of being slighted and marginalized by many within the movement, and at times even by her beloved husband. Ushabai had begun to understand the finer points of ideological differences within the Party, but more importantly, after living with and working so closely with the mill workers, she felt that, more than others in the Party,

she grasped their feelings and thoughts. But such affective identification did not enhance her standing in inner Party discussion:

> Often, I would speak up and express my thoughts. But who would listen? I didn't know English. In essence, I was uneducated. People would ignore me, thinking, this woman who lives among us, she hasn't read any books of philosophy.
>
> (124)

Although she does not specify this, she implies that even the workers took her political opinions less seriously because she was uneducated. Ushabai was always acutely conscious of her difference from other Party and union activists such as Ahilya Rangnekar, who were highly educated and came from more progressive and upper-class backgrounds. Ushabai did not neatly fit into the category of 'middle-class women cadres and leaders', which meant that she felt herself to be much closer to and even a part of the workers.

At that time, Dange himself commanded near reverence from the workers. Gangadhar Chitnis, General Secretary of the GKU, recalled that when Subhash Chandra Bose came to Bitia mills to support the striking workers, the meeting took place in a paddy field:

> It was raining on that day. The workers were all holding umbrellas. Then Dange said, 'Subhash-babu wants to see all of you, but all he can see is umbrellas.' In a moment, all the umbrellas closed, and the workers stood in the rain. Subash-babu was taken aback.
>
> (Menon and Adarkar 158)[15]

Despite Dange's extraordinary charisma and hold on the workers, however, there were deep differences within the union and within the Communist Party. These factions stemmed from different understandings of the roles of the indigenous bourgeoisie, the Congress Party, and after Independence, the Indian state. Was the basic divide in Indian society between British colonialists and Indians, or between upper and lower classes? Should Indian communists create a united front with mainstream nationalists with a view to taking control of this front, or should they try and isolate bourgeois nationalists? What was the connection between the situation in India, and that obtaining in the world at large? Such questions had a long history going back to the early years of the Communist Party, as Sanjay Seth has traced. They produced increasingly deep differences from the end of the 1930s onwards, resulting eventually in a change of leadership just after independence in 1947 when P.C. Joshi (who was in favour of a United Front with the Congress Party) was removed from Party leadership, and B.T. Ranadive (who opposed it) took over.[16] In addition, within the GKU too, leaders did not agree about strategy, and their differences could take ugly forms with charges and counter-charges of misappropriation of funds, including against Dange (Gupta 116).

Ushabai comments that she didn't understand all the squabbles and debates, and simply followed the instructions given to the rank and file, the 'workers-soldiers' of the Party: 'I walked in the direction indicated by our captain, but we soldiers were astonished to witness the quarrels and differences between these captains' (*Pan Aikta Kaun* 151). At that time, Subhas Bose had called for a split in the Congress, hoping to attract the progressive and left elements, but he was criticized by the CPI which was at that point not willing to abandon its strategy of a 'United National Front' (Seth 183). Ushabai writes that workers like her also felt that some Party leaders were wrong in the way they criticized Bose, but there was no space to express these disagreements. Of course, she was no ordinary Party worker. Usha followed her husband's political views, and was, she acknowledges, the medium through which Dange shared these with the outside world; as a result, she writes, she was unfairly targeted by his opponents. According to her, she survived attempts to oust her from the union only because of huge support from the workers, and she bore the brunt of anger against Dange (*Pan Aikta Kaun* 77).

Particularly painful for Ushabai was an experience in jail in 1940, when she was again arrested during a strike. Dange was interned at Deoli camp for four years during this time. Ushabai was sent to Yerwada jail in Pune. She was allowed to take her 2-year-old daughter Shaila, but Roza, who was older could not accompany her, and was, once again, sheltered by Party workers. Ushabai describes the terrible situation in jail, where even milk was not available for the baby:

> Our request to look after our daughter at our own expense was dismissed. Terrible food, cold dark barracks, guards who shouted night and day and hearing whom Shaila woke up screaming in fright. In the end, it seemed as if she would die.
>
> (175)

Ushabai was bitter that other women leaders in the Party who were in jail with her did not come forward to help. She names Minakshi Karadkar, a trade unionist who led strikes in Sholapur mills, Godavari Parulekar, who later led the Warli peasants revolt in 1945, and Nargis (presumably Nargis Batlivala, who worked in the Party Headquarters at Red Flag Hall where the commune was situated). 'All of them were educated and learned,' Ushabai writes,

> and they were politically aligned with Ranadive; they insisted on trying to educate me about all the political mistakes they thought D had made.[17] Even though I was uneducated, but I was hardly ignorant of the fact that I would be made the victim of diatribes against D. Their main suggestion was that I should leave the party and stay at home to look after the children. I did not heed this suggestion. After Ranadive became party secretary who knows how many women had to suffer such harassment in jail.
>
> (175)

These Party comrades, according to Ushabai, were displeased when several women from the Congress, also jail-mates of Ushabai's, helped with Shaila, and when the child became very attached to them (175). Ushabai's life, both before she came into the Party and after, was quite different from those women who came from affluent and highly educated families. Not all of those who went on to become leaders in the Party were from the upper echelons of society, but many were. Despite talk of declassing, and despite the inter-class mingling in the commune, these class differences within the Party did not disappear, and they affected its day-to-day functioning, as well as its hierarchies.

There were also differences in education, outlook, and sophistication between Dange and Ushabai. Dange was a staunch atheist, but Ushabai visited temples and other sites of religious importance whenever they travelled together (106). Sometimes, she writes, Dange would accompany her, but on the condition that the site had to be of historic or cultural importance; she confesses that she would quietly dip into his pocket for money to give alms. He didn't stop her from offering alms or praying, saying 'Your religion and mine are different.' But he continued to mock her beliefs – on one occasion he asked her to pray that the political quarrels should continue, so that he would continue to travel, and she to go with him, getting opportunities to visit more temples and thus accrue blessings for her piety. When Prema Kantak, a Gandhian woman whom Ushabai had befriended, arrived gaudily dressed in a golden sari, bedecked with jewellery, Dange mocked Prema's attire, asking 'Has some revolution happened in the Ashram? The *sanyasin* (ascetic) has become an *abhisarika* (woman going to meet her lover)? And how has she come here?' Prema burst out, 'I am neither a *sanyasin*, nor am I an *abhisarika*. I felt like wearing this attire today, so what's the big deal?' Roza thought that Prema was member of the 'petit bourgeoise'. But Ushabai viewed her with compassion, reflecting that Prema was a lonely woman, in a world that had little understanding for such women. What if Dange had not come along, Ushabai wondered, might she herself have been in a similar position? She offers a poignant image of such despair, imagining herself (and perhaps all such women) as drawing her own tears along with buckets of water from the well in the house [of her parents-in-law]. One day, the rope of the well, and my life, would have snapped and no one would even have known about it' (115).

Despite her constant feeling of gratitude towards Dange, and her deep craving for togetherness, Ushabai was no doormat. Shortly after marriage, Dange repeatedly asked her for money for his political trips but never offered to take her. On one occasion, she asked Dange what he liked about a book he was reading by N. C. Phadke. She had read the book, and she was angry because it completely ignored the role of women in strikes. 'Would his (Phadke's) hands hurt if he wrote about us?' she sarcastically commented. Dange answered, also with some irony, 'Why are you angry? You women are only useful as model servants (in Phadke's view).' Ushabai was even angrier and retorted, 'It was these maid servants who blasted the police that day. I said this and many other such things. Dange was silent' (149). It is evident that even as Dange had enabled Ushabai's education, he was not above drawing attention to its limits. Many years later, when she visited London with him,

she was 'very enthusiastic' to see the city about which she had heard so much since her childhood, noting that 'English history saturates every pore of Indians.' Dange showed her Marx's cemetery, and the Tower of London where 'their looted treasure is kept'. Then he said to her, 'Now what else should I show you? You know neither Shakespeare nor Dickens, or I could have shown you places associated with them. [. . .] Ok. I will show you their Chor Bazar and Byculla (their second-hand market and vegetable market)' implying that these would be the only places that would resonate with her own experience (238). Ushabai says she wanted to retort but chose to refrain.

The title of Ushabai's book – 'Who listens to me?' – is also its recurring refrain. The book shows that the very act of writing is Ushabai's way of reaching an audience who will listen. She is quite frank about the costs of her life with Dange, her constantly thwarted craving for more companionship, her feeling of being abandoned by him at key moments of her life. After she lost two newly-born babies, she was really scared when she was taken to hospital to deliver her second daughter. Her doctor spelt out to Dange her need for his presence; Dange assured the doctor he would be back within an hour, but was away the whole day and came back only after the baby was born. Some years earlier, she had wept because he sold all their household goods when they shifted temporarily from Bombay to Poona. In Poona, though, she felt as if she 'had returned to my maternal home' for she recalled that when she had been a student there, Dange would visit her every weekend. In that city, 'he was mine, only mine. I wanted to erase the fourteen years in between and start anew' (94). This craving for intimacy, for everyday contact, for continuing togetherness was never to leave her, and it was never to be satisfied.

Ushabai is especially bitter about the impact of their hard lives upon her children:

> [O]ur lives as workers' leaders were unfair to our daughters. My two sons died as soon as they were born. [. . .] It seems as if her difficult childhood made Roza irritable, and Shaila hugely nervous and apprehensive. Who knows the physical and psychological effect of the difficulties suffered in childhood? [. . .] Roza had to have many operations and she had become hollow inside. But if anything happened to me or the children D would become very sorrowful. He considered himself responsible for this state of affairs. Those people who eat *laddoos* and *puris* (rich food) and talk about spiritualism and freedom, how will they understand our dedication and sacrifice?
>
> But how will all this change? There is no other way out. The mission should be to change the world through a complete revolution. So what if one has to give up one's life for that?.
>
> (175)

But despite this note of affirmation, and despite her fierce dedication to the cause as she saw it, Ushabai's memoir makes clear that she paid a heavy psychological and material price for her involvement with the Party and with Dange.

In her view, Dange was also alienated from comrades who were more sophisticated and Westernized, writing that he did not feel at home in the Party headquarters where 'young people educated at Oxford, Cambridge and London worked' and where the commune flourished. As she describes the commune, including Mai and her whole family, she quotes lawyer Bhulabhai Desai's view that it was 'like an ashram' (188). She herself was quite clear that communes were not the way to reform the family. For her, marriage and coupledom were the result of radical action on her part and Dange's, and not some outdated bourgeois norms. In the second edition of the book, she adds:

> I do not like these communes etc. at all. There should be a husband and wife in a family. Both should do the housework together. Look after the children. Eat their own food, live happily in their own way. I also took up employment when D was in jail, looked after the entire household. When he was around, he would do the housework. Serving food, washing dishes, everything he did himself. Our house was no commune. But we always had 20–25 rotis, dal and vegetables on hand. Any political worker who came would go only after eating. Our house was everybody's.
>
> (*Ushakaal* 208)

It is significant that this paragraph is missing in the first edition. Why did Ushabai feel compelled to add it when the book was republished after Dange's death? Did she feel that only now could she praise his domestic habits? Or was this a species of nostalgia that coloured her earlier view? The young workers were like her children, Ushabai writes in both editions. Whenever she felt the lack of a son, they would reassure her, 'We are there, why do you worry?' (*Pan Aikta Kaun* 128). But Ushabai was also conscious that such an open house was not run on 'everybody's' labour and money. She acutely felt the lack of money to run such an open home and provide for her family. Her larger political collectivity and the smaller nuclear unit within it did not always fit easily.

Despite her own unhappy experiences in childhood, in her view a family was important, a shelter against the world:

> I looked at D. I saw someone who had given everything to his mission and had no one in this world except me, Roza and Shaila. [. . .] He is the only person I have seen who has not one relative of his own. [. . .] It's hard to know his innermost feelings, his sorrow. He never talks about these, keeps all his feelings inside.
>
> (224)

Ushabai was concerned about her husband's deepening depression, which she attributed to his being politically marginalized by Ranadive and his faction. She also hints at her own bouts of depression, most of which stemmed from her sense that they

were rarely a family together. Whenever she describes moments of happiness, she adds the comment that these were far between. Once, when she fell and broke her hand, and Dange announced just then that he needed to go to Bengal where the famine had ravaged the lives of millions, she broke down and begged, 'At least don't leave me alone today' (189). At least that time, Dange did not go.

Ushabai's craving for a normal family life was shared by wives of other communist leaders. In his autobiography, communist leader E. M. S. Namboodiripad confesses that his wife, who was 16 when she was given in marriage to him, stood by all his unorthodox decisions, including his giving up his share of family property. What hurt her was their long separations:

> A famous Malayalam poet puts into the mouth of one of his female characters the words: 'they praise me for being this and that. How I wish I were none of these but an ordinary woman who is able to live with her husband'. This [*sic*] may well express my wife's thought after half-a-century of our married life. [. . .] Close to me in life and emotions, [both my mother and my wife] [. . .] were yet distant because my outlook on life and practices was [*sic*] different from those of both.
>
> (96)

On the contrary, Ushabai *did* share her husband's outlook and political activities. And yet long absences from her husband could not be compensated for by their shared political commitment.

In 1944, when Dange announced he was going to London to attend meetings of the World Federation of Trade Unions, she was particularly 'disturbed, and sat down. I couldn't speak' (*Pan Aikta Kaun* 192). She tried everything to stop this trip. She went to the Party office, and spoke to Party leaders B. T. Ranadive, P. C. Joshi, and G. Adhikari, all of whom told her not to worry. They said that while it was necessary for Dange to go abroad, he would return safely. Ushabai was miserable:

> So even this attempt of mine came to nothing. [. . .] Once again with my two daughters I sat lonely at home. I felt I have lost 10–20 years of my life. Hope and enthusiasm had ended. Will D come back? In what condition will he return? Would milk be available there? But coriander would not be available at all. I became upset thinking about that.
>
> (194)

This time, there was a new edge to her misery. Ushabai had said to the Party leaders that she was worried about Dange's well-being, but in her book, she also expresses the fear that he would get involved with another woman there:

> They say the English nation is a land of free-loving women [Gandharva women]. Many Indians went there and married English women. How can I rely on D's not doing so? I knew his poetic, romantic temperament. I knew that

> he could transform into reality the poetic sentiments of Sanskrit literature. If he became a Yaksha [hero of the Sanskrit poem *Meghdoot* who pined for his far away love] in the land of free-loving women I would die. [. . .] My youth was wasted during four years of his being in jail in Kanpur. He was again arrested during the world war, and we were apart for three years, and now this exile in England, across the seven seas. [. . .] I used to awaken with fright.
>
> (194)

This time, the parting seemed harder than ever, and it also had a different undertone of emotional and sexual insecurity to it.

Why, after so many years of marriage, did Ushabai worry about Dange's infidelity? Was it really because she feared the lure of Englishwomen with their supposed ideas of free love? The writings of several Party comrades and sympathizers imply that Dange's visit to England may have been considered important by Party leaders for other than political reasons. Indeed, it appears that Ushabai might have asked the Party to intervene in her marriage because Dange had become close to Anil Marcia de Silva, a high-spirited and unorthodox Sri Lankan journalist and activist. Anil had come to India in 1940, first to Bangalore and then to Bombay; in both cities, she helped form the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), becoming its first secretary. Anil was an unusual figure among Party circles because she refused to play down her sexuality, emphasizing her femininity and sensuality (de Mel 121). Wearing colourful saris, and flowers in her hair, she was to be photographed by Cartier Bresson, and become close friends with Pablo Neruda. In India, she had a relationship with the scientist Homi Bhabha, and lived with writer Mulk Raj Anand. Both in Sri Lanka and in India, Neloufer de Mel observes, her sexuality became a 'cause for speculation and concern' (122).

Indian communists tended to speak of Anil as a femme fatale, in tones that bordered on the salacious and betrayed their own fascination with her (Jayawardena 234–35). In his memoirs, titled *Toti Hoti Tir* (From the Boat to the Shore), Hiren Mukherjee, one of the founder members of the Progressive Writers' Association and Chairman of IPTA, writes:

> I have already mentioned about the self-willed spontaneous behavior of this Ceylonese girl. She was quite uninhibited when she narrated to me various intimate episodes of her life. One day she showed me a number of pencil portraits, done by a famous scientist with whom she had continued an affair for a period and whom she found inadequate in the physical demands of the role. She had averred out of jest that had she not liked my wife whom she met in Calcutta, she might not have spared me as well. As if my opinion was of little consequence, and it all depend [*sic*] on how she wished things to happen. I have earlier mentioned the jesting remark of P. C. Joshi that had it been anybody other than me, Anil's hospitality might have induced the Party to expel the recipient. [. . .] True, things I came to know amused me, but they astounded me as well. A front ranking leader was once over head and ears in infatuation for

> Anil [*sic*]. His enraged wife had lodged a complaint. The matter was ultimately put to test when that leader, wayward at times, but of real capabilities, had to sail abroad on an urgent job. Anil showed me letters from him. I abstain from naming him, but the incident is true.
>
> (quoted in Pradhan xx)

Sudhi Pradhan quotes these remarks in his collection of Marxist cultural documents, commenting,

> Happily I had no such experience with Anil. Perhaps she liked to play her pranks with the big guns of the Party. I have already mentioned that her observations printed in the 1946 report of the IPTA are quite factual and sound.
>
> (xxii)

Pradhan's assumption is that despite Anil's political acumen, Mukherjee is right about her wayward sexuality, which threatened Party discipline and norms; as de Mel observes, in Pradhan's massive collection of cultural documents, 'no other figure of the CPI or IPTA was discussed in [. . .] this way' (127).

Not just men, but Party and left-wing women shared this vocabulary when it came to women like Anil de Silva. In her memoirs, socialite and Party fellow-traveller Raj Thapar adopts an even more suggestive tone; Anil

> kept me entertained with tales of sex, beginning with her experience in the Communist Party – the Indian one. She had applied for membership formally, and as was the rule then, she had to be on probation for three months. So emancipated as she was, she moved into the commune which was overflowing with an assortment of all sorts of males, all dedicated to the cause of the working class and all starved of women. [. . .] In between intense discussions on the nature of the class structure, they would suddenly find themselves staring into Anil's rather gu-gu eyes. This obviously panicked them, threw them off guard. 'They looked so sorry for themselves, they had nothing except their work, so what could I possibly do?' It was all in the plural and I could just about picture the kind of havoc she must have wrought in the PHQ with her mere presence. The plurality finally zeroed in on Dange, the leader with the greatest personal charm, but his influence could not guarantee her membership and she had to finally leave. Mulk pulled her away from Dange but the two men bore each other a grudge for the rest of their lives.
>
> (58–59)

For Thapar, too, Anil is the knowing, somewhat callous siren among helpless men, even though she notes that Dange was no naïf, having earlier been besotted with a Czech woman. Moreover, Thapar suggests that Anil embarked on a relationship with Dange just to get a Party card more quickly, thus rendering as utilitarian and cynical what might have been a genuine sexual attraction between them.

Neloufer de Mel speculates that sexual conservatism within the Communist Party may have stemmed from the persecution it faced and the secrecy with which it had to operate when banned, but more credible is Romila Thapar's observation that it had to do with the 'strong streak of puritanism that attends all revolutionary parties' (quoted in de Mel 123). However, as I have argued in this book, we have to understand the specifically *Indian* nature of such 'puritanism', which was shared with the wider nationalist culture. For all her rather salacious delight in narrating the sexual exploits of Anil de Silva, Raj Thapar is careful to suggest that she herself was comparatively innocent and easily shocked by extra-marital affairs. It is not surprising then that some believe that Anil was expelled from IPTA on the charges of 'sexual misconduct' (I have been able to find no evidence that supports this claim). My interest lies here less in corroborating or refuting particular accusations against her than in pointing out that if it is true that she and Dange were involved, and that Ushabai complained to the Party, then it is likely that Dange's trip to London was also understood by the Party as a way of distancing him from Anil.

Ushabai's fears about Dange having affairs with English women thus stemmed less from their supposedly free-wheeling ways than from her fears about his. His was the masculine privilege and sophistication that allowed him easy access to equally sophisticated and cosmopolitan women. In this triangulation, with Anil cast as a femme fatal, Ushabai was labeled conservative. Others thought of her as unhinged and crazy. (She already had a reputation as cranky, demanding, and bossy, and as using Dange's position to bolster her own.) Misogyny certainly played a role in such characterization, but, as I have tried to indicate, her own journey from a child widow to a union leader and Party wife, as well as her class and education, did not prepare her for her husband's more urbane and Westernized ways. For her the nuclear family was not a bourgeois aberration to be spurned but a space of refuge, for nurture, and for freedom of a kind unthinkable within the conventional family she was first married into. The very organizations that enabled her to visualize this also made these goals impossible to achieve.

Communism, as Gyan Prakash points out, changed a great many lives in Girangaon: 'the Communists turned Girangaon into a red bastion with industrial actions but also with attempts to forge a progressive culture' (212). He also rightly underlines the importance of women to 'this politically militant army in Girangaon. Middle-class women, radicalized by Marxist ideals and by their communist family members, became activists in the trade union. Marxism's modern outlook also freed them from customary constraints and sparked their activism' (214). As we have seen, although Ushabai's narrative certainly celebrates some of these possibilities, it also makes it clear that 'Marxism' did not 'free' all women to the same degree or in the same way. Even as they believed that Marxism was the only way to restructure society and the family, their class background, their personal circumstances, and their own personalities and those of the men in their lives, caused a great many of them to have to negotiate gingerly the contradictions of being both women and Marxists. Like some of the other stories that I have discussed in previous chapters, Ushabai's account of her activism and her home underlines that constant shortage of money that made it

difficult, even painful, to raise children. She underlines the loss of intimacy and coupledom entailed in political activism (even as political activism had enabled such coupledom for her in the first place). Unlike her more educated counterparts, Ushabai experiences and identifies the class hierarchies that fractured female solidarity within the Party. Gender asymmetry exacerbated all these other contradictions, complicating even those intimacies that had been forged by defying social conventions, such as her marriage.

Did writing help women recognize, indicate, and thus come to terms with some of these issues? Certainly, Ushabai seems aware that in writing her story, she is reaching out to an audience that will not only listen (finally!) to her account of her achievements, but also hear her lament that she was *not* listened to enough by her comrades and her husband. She writes that Dange could be dismissive of her writing, even if under the cover of humor, telling her that '*raddi* (waste paper) is being sold for a good rate these days. In the face of such mockery, how can I write?' (*Pan Aikta Kaun* 234). But write she did, and the result is a rare narrative which has spoken to other activists struggling with the marginalization of women in many political movements and in accounts of such movements. As Lata Pratibha Madhukar puts it:

> Women don't write [. . .] only Usha Dange has written. [. . .] She has written that she had many nervous breakdowns but even she hasn't written the complete story. [. . .] A lot has been written about male activists. Regarding women full-timers, there is a notion that her husband will provide for her. And we cannot talk about our economic tensions. [. . .] What will people who have given away their entire lives to such movements do? [. . .] no one has thought about the personal lives of these full-timers – about their wives, about their husbands, if they are women, about their children. I feel it is very important to think about all this.
>
> (Madhukar 23)[18]

Madhukar suggests that those who complain about how NGOs (who pay their employees) have been detrimental to political movements in India need to think about the way in which political organizations – and not just left-wing ones – make unreasonable demands upon the personal lives of their activists. She is surely right that the costs of revolutionary activities are rarely to be found in political records. Ushabai's story registers these costs by recounting closely what it felt like to inhabit, as a woman, a home-maker, and an activist, the working-class movement and the Communist Party in their formative years. Most valuably, her memoir makes clear the difficulties and the lack of fit between her personal and her political worlds, even as it builds a compelling narrative of emancipation and change.

*

The fissures between political and personal life emerge as even more radically asymmetrical in the memoirs of Parvatibai Bhore, to whose extraordinary memoir,

Eka Rannaraginichi Hakikata (The Story of a Fighter) I will now turn. Parvatibai's family was of the barber caste and although they were fairly well-off – her father owned four barber salons – their caste status rankled. Her grandfather had resented his occupation, and once, irate, had beaten up a client, for which he had been sent to jail for six months. Parvatibai's father warned her that she 'had this propensity of my grandpa [. . .] to struggle and quarrel if anything goes against your wish. [. . .] Do you think such behaviour suits a girl child?' (Bhore 5–6). But Parvatibai was 'proud that I have inherited rebelliousness from my grandfather' and determined to behave like Dada, her adopted brother, by going to school and out into the world (6).

Parvatibai *was* sent to school, against her mother's wishes, who had asked: 'Is Parvatibai a Brahmin girl, why would you send her to school?' (7). However, her father, himself barely educated, believed that 'It is not mandatory that only those castes should learn.' They had a remarkable example of the effects of education close at hand. Parvatibai remembers that 'Babasaheb Ambedkar was staying in one of the tenements (near her parents' house). [. . .] When we looked at Babasaheb's room we could see all the books inside.' But it was difficult for her mother to shake off both caste and gender assumptions and she continued to worry: 'What if something bad happens because of it, she should get married as early as possible' (7). Caste identities were rigid and internalized; when Parvatibai wondered why people in their tenement used foul language and quarreled with one another, her mother used to say 'because we are barbers. [. . .] Because we are lower castes. From Mother or Appa the answers were same'. Parvatibai's questions lingered – she writes that 'I never got any satisfactory answers from anyone. We are barbers cannot be an answer.' She noted that because her father was better-off than the others, 'we got some respect in society' (9).

Still, their economic well-being did not mean that the family could flout gender or caste norms, and, at the age of 9, Parvati learnt that she was to be married to Shankar, a family servant who used to drop her to school, and who was ten years older than herself. Apparently, her father had arranged this marriage, even in the face of some doubts from the groom's family, in order to ensure that Parvatibai stayed within his reach and wasn't sent off to a marital home in a distant village. Parvatibai resented being pulled out of school and hustled out of childhood in this high-handed way, but she was allowed no options. As she notes,

> Now-a-days if you tell any girl that your marriage has been fixed she will not ask with whom? She will ask who decided this? Did you ask me? We could not dare to ask such questions. [. . .] We played games with dolls. But do dolls have any rights?
>
> (11)

Parvatibai's fight against the doll's house in which she found herself after marriage was to fuel her desperate desires to become part of a different collectivity, not of women, but of the working class fighting against both imperial and capitalist rule. Over time, her political work enabled the very vocabulary she used to understand women's domestic servitude.

After marriage, Parvatibai began to call Shankar 'Saheb' (sir/master) because her previous way of addressing him would no longer be considered appropriate. And indeed, he was her master, or tried to be. At her parents-in-laws' place, she realized that 'Home can also be like a prison. I lost my freedom' (14). Because her family was better off than Shankar's and he was still employed by her father, Parvatibai was somewhat cushioned from the worst kind of domestic ill-treatment. Her father would send them 'grains and other essentials' and her parents-in-law expected that one day she would inherit his property. But precisely this economic difference exacerbated their resentment, and, along with deeply ingrained notions of appropriate behaviour for lower castes and women, shaped their prescriptions for her. Brought up in a relatively free atmosphere, she was shocked to discover that she was expected to stay silent, to keep her head down even while talking, and to not venture out of the home. It was not considered appropriate for her to have any money on her person. Once when she gave a coin to a waiter, her sister-in-law asked: 'Why would you have any money on you? Isn't your husband earning?' (14).

Incidents designed to teach her her rightful place multiplied. One day, she writes, when

> I loosened up my *mangalsutra* [necklace signifying a woman's married status], my sister-in-law asked me why I did this. I replied saying it looks like a dog's belt, to which she replied saying women must be loyal like dogs. I said it is hurting me. She said, do not act like Brahmins do.
>
> (25)

To talk with another man was understood to be 'the biggest crime for a woman'. Parvatibai's husband was chronically jealous, flying into rages when he saw her massaging her brother, and, many years later, even her grown-up son. Parvatibai's prose is revelatory both in its account of her husband's threatened masculinity but also in its understanding of the place of domestic violence in her natal family. She came to understand

> that he is very suspicious by nature. [. . .] It would have been better if he could have just beaten me. [. . .] Appa [Father] had beaten up my mother, and he used to make me get out of the home so that I could not see the beating. But the marks on her body bore witness to it. Only in the rarest case there will be a woman who has not faced a beating by her husband. Many women have died with these wounds. [. . .] For me it was the beginning of such wounds. The question was, how will I fight carrying these wounds?
>
> (14)

Remarkably, she found a way, even though her domestic life was to remain a lifelong battleground; as she puts it later in the book: 'My entire life after marriage was spent in fighting. [. . .] But I have no remorse' (49).

Parvatibai's account shuttles between memories of particular events and the contemporary thoughts they inspire in her so that there is a looping, meditative, quality to her prose. Thus, while reminiscing about her early married days, she comments on the early pregnancies of young wives who had not developed any attachment to their spouses; in 'those days a woman would give birth to an offspring with an ease similar to the ease in which seasons change. [. . .] She would be rendered as a machine producing bodies' (25). She herself would give birth to a boy Shivaji and a girl Shakuntala before she was 20 years old.

For Parvatibai as a woman confined within her home, the balcony of the family's apartment in a *chawl* or workers' tenement was the liminal area between the home and the world. In her account, it emerges as the space from which she continually looked upon the world and assessed the relationship between what she saw outside and what she experienced at home. The comparison between her home and the world outside honed her determination to straddle the divide between them: 'I could see distant mills and their chimneys. Often a strike or a rally where workers would go past shouting slogans. Every time I came out on the balcony, I would wish I could work somewhere outside, like Dada' (23). Her brother, who had embodied freedom for her as a child, helped her at key moments throughout her adult life and 'shaped me politically' (4–6). When she despaired at never being allowed to work like him, he advised her to read. Acutely conscious that she had only studied until the second grade, she slowly made her way through novels, as well as the daily newspaper *Nava Kaal* (New Age) that had been established in 1921 by Tilak's followers. Her brother informed her about Dange, the workers' leader and Ushabai his wife; the latter piqued her interest: 'a woman who steps out of her home and works was a topic of curiosity for us. The moment we'd get to know about Usha Tai's arrival, we would flock to our balconies' (27). From her balcony too, she observed a house where three 'lal bawtevala' (Red flag people or communists) lived. She learnt who they were. One of them

> was a white man. His name was [Ben] Bradley. He had come here from abroad to work for the Party. He was doing so despite of the ban on their party. Thus, I was more curious about it. Had someone predicted that these people would change my life, I would have laughed at them. No one knows how time will change our fate. (29)[19]

Between her reading and watching, Parvatibai's political awareness of the world sharpened; she learnt that the worker's union was established in 1928, and that women workers also came out to fight during the strike in that year. Now, 'Parel was a worker's warzone' and many 'young people were fighting for the workers' (30). So were the three communists whom she observed closely. Her growing political consciousness resulted in domestic battles, and her resentment at the constraints of her domesticity sharpened her political consciousness:

> I was hearing and reading all this (the developments in the Communist movements and worker's strike) sitting at home. I wished I could step out like

> Dada and work. But how would I get permission to do so? The climate at home was driven by the weight of traditions. We were at least 50 years behind. But I was fighting. I was fighting for trivial things such as putting vermillion on the forehead, *mangalsutra* and what kind of clothes to wear. When I said that I would visit a maternity home during Shankuntala's time [when her daughter Shakuntala was to be born] there was a huge argument at the house. They thought destitute and poor women should go to a maternity home. [. . .] Saheb would feel that I should look after the house just like other women.
>
> (33)

Parvatibai yearned, strained, and fought to become part of this new world that she could glimpse through her confines. A meeting in Kumbhar *chawl* where Ushabai was going to speak was a crucial event, and one to which she returns repeatedly. Its effect on her is described in several places in her book, and is interwoven with her increasing determination to confront her 'jailor' husband. This meeting took place on 12 July 1929, following a riot the previous day when workers resisted a police ban on union meetings. Parvatibai wanted to go, but knowing she would never get permission to do so, 'I made up a story about having to attend a *haldi kunku* ceremony and went to the meeting' with a woman worker friend (35). At another point in the narrative, she acknowledges that she had seen from her balcony that the police had opened fire on the meeting (49). But 'the firing didn't deter me. The intention behind opening the fire was to curb the protests'. Somehow, this made her even more desperate to go. Parvatibai expresses this desperation as a need, crucial for her personal fulfillment:

> Even after bearing two children, I hadn't found comfort in marital life. I was struggling to change the course. I had read about the Russian revolution, the worker's movement in Parel, the political climate in the newspaper. Hence, I couldn't suppress my urge [for a different life].
>
> (35)[20]

Predictably, her husband was furious when he came to know about her attending this meeting. Parvatibai decided not to stay silent, or lie to get her way, but fight 'as I needed, with sweetness or by confrontations.' She bluntly told her husband: 'You are a jailor. This is a jail. I know what you are afraid of. You are suspicious because I am a woman.' Appropriating Gandhi's tactics and vocabulary she went on an '*anna* satyagraha' or hunger strike (38). Ultimately, she was permitted to start political work on the condition that she first finished all her household tasks. She was 21 years old.

Parvatibai had also come a long way in terms of her political affiliations. At first, following her brother's Gandhian beliefs, her idea of political work was to sell homespun cloth to the public. One day a worker to whom she tried to sell khadi told her that handspun cloth was too expensive for poor to buy. Cheaper cloth was produced in the mills, 'And you will suggest mill workers should use expensive khadi.

How is that possible?' The worker told her the problem was that the profits of the mills went to the owners. Parvatibai 'was disturbed by this conversation. I couldn't sit idle anymore. My self had awakened, and was seeing its reflection in the people's movement' (41). Her vocabulary foregrounds a felt need that energizes her emotions and her intellect. She writes that she now was desperate to meet the workers of the proscribed Tarun Kamkari Sangathana (Young Workers' Association). She became increasingly disenchanted with the Gandhian movement, noting that people were 'rendered jobless after the non-cooperation movement and the Salt March. Their livelihood had gone'. (45).

Even with her second-grade education, Parvatibai had been struggling to read political materials. One day, she sent her young son out with two *annas* to buy a new biography of Lenin she had seen advertised from Bhau Sawlaram Patkar, one of the trio of communists whom she looked upon from her balcony.[21] She told him,

> 'Patkar uncle stays in the *chawl* opposite to ours. Give him this money and tell him that my mother wants to read Lenin's biography.' Shivaji got the book. I asked him, 'what did they say?' 'They said your mother is going to read this? I said yes.' 'What else did they say?' 'They asked about the baby in our house. They can see it on the balcony.' 'What did you tell them?' 'I said that's my younger brother.' [By this time Parvati had a third child] 'Did they say anything else?' 'They said if you need anything else to read we can give that too.'
>
> (Bhore 52)

Parvati began to read books with Patkar and S. G. Tambitkar by joining classes run by the comrades. She also – and this is startling, given her life – started acting as a courier for them, swallowing the letters if she was followed. 'My friendship with these people was increasingly fostering' she writes, recalling her admiration for their camaraderie with one another, as well as their simple lives: 'They had let go of the desire for a job. Had given up on material pleasures of life. They survived often merely eating puffed rice. Tea was their only luxury' (64). They had also given up on 'normal married lives. [. . .] Their sacrifice was huge. The situation at my home was contrary. Saheb would always be suspicious. I don't know what Appa saw in him. I was married off just like everyone else' (74). She discovers and craves communist single-mindedness; from her vantage point, complete dedication to a political cause lets an activist lead an enviable life, free of domestic entanglements.

The conflicts at home escalated. She recognized that she had become bigger, had matured because of her political work and reading, while her husband had become smaller, shrunk into jealousy: 'Home stopped being a shelter. I couldn't avoid the attractions of what lay beyond the home.' So painful was the difficulty of moving from home to the political world she craved that she tried to commit suicide by drowning herself in the sea. But she describes how even this act was frustrated by her being a woman. As she waded into the water, she was approached by one of a group of

sadhus. Fearing that she would be raped, Parvatibai fled (58). Patkar made her swear an oath never to try to take her own life again.

During the famous Bitia mill strike in 1939, Parvatibai started working at Ushabai's side; she narrates with relish how Ushabai used female pickets to shame male strike-breakers. When they went to collect money for workers, middle-class families would taunt them. She couldn't afford to become lax at home, she writes, because then the middle-class women of her acquaintance would find fault with her. 'The funny part is', she observes, 'that a woman who goes out to see a film and a woman who works like me would be measured on the same scale' (66). She attended classes that the union arranged for striking workers (taught by Lalji Pendse), noting that he taught them the Marathi alphabet by referring to objects they worked with – hence 'S' stood for *sut* or yarn, and *Cha* for *Chakh* or wheel. She learned her lesson well: 'I understood that while talking to the workers we have to talk in their language; without realizing it I was getting the education required to work with the workers' (65).

One day, when she returned home late after going with Ushabai to meet arrested comrades (including Dange) in jail, her family would not let her back into the house. At that time, women could be simply thrown out of their homes for disobedience, and also denied access to their children. Parvatibai firmly told them that she had not committed any crime, and while she would sleep outside on the balcony she would not leave her home. In her desperation, she started thinking about comrades who might help her should such situations arise again. But Patkar was in prison. There was Tambitkar too, but the fact that she had developed feelings for Tambitkar made asking him for help difficult: 'I had a soft corner for him but couldn't possibly tell what it meant. Saheb's suspicion had put me in a dilemma' (67). She suggests that in different circumstances she might have felt freer to express herself, or even to understand her feelings. Soon after she went to see a movie with Tambitkar, and 'realized this has to stop' (74). Parvatibai is unable to say why she felt this way, and her prose suggests that it could be either because of the attraction she felt for him, or because he had just been released from prison on parole, and being seen with him would spell trouble for her. Later, she muses: 'Attraction between men and women is natural' but at the same time, she suggests, there is always the threat of sexual violence. Women are so scared of being preyed upon that it even stops them from doing political work. She herself had warded off a potential sexual attack: 'I had once straightened up one man at Comrade Bhide's house. After that nobody took chances with me' (113).

One turning point in her personal life came when she fell very ill; depressed, she felt that she had lived enough, and refused her medicines. To her astonishment, her husband called Tambitkar to persuade her to take them. She asked him why he thought she would obey Tambitkar. His reply astounded her: 'You are big and I am small. You address big meetings. I am an ordinary person' (81). Saheb confessed that he had gone secretly to hear her oration. She felt so thrilled, she writes,

> for what else does a woman want? Even if I had died during that illness, it would have been fine with me. At last, my partner had understood me. His

> suspicions had faded away. I would have died with vermillion still on my forehead (i.e. still married).

Despite her life-long alienation from him, the idea of a woman dying as a *suhagin* still spells a kind of bliss for her. But a few pages later, she notes that religious symbols are pointless; because she had spent time with Tambitkar, she had given up the Hartalika fast (observed by women for a blissful married life.)

We might interpret such contradictions, like Ushabai's refusal to stop going to temples, as a measure of incomplete radicalism. They should instead allow us to see the enormous distance travelled by Parvatibai, the deep hold of the beliefs and restrictions that shaped her world, many of which she managed to shake off. Parvatibai herself reminds us constantly of this distance, precisely because she finds it impossible to forget her humble origins. When Ushabai was arrested, and Parvatibai was asked to replace her on the union executive, she 'thought they might be joking about this. A woman who saw people's movement from gallery thirteen or fourteen years ago years ago was now to be made executive of the union'. Once she took charge, she had no hesitation in providing different kinds of labour for the union:

> I would reach the worker's union office by 7 am, tuck my saree around my waist and clean the office space. The union didn't have funds. I could now get a sense of community. My 'self' had dissolved and my scope had broadened. I travelled a lot in the Shivadi region. Passed a plate around and collected 250 rupees for the union. As a co-executive, I worked in a manner that everyone had to take notice.
>
> (72)

It is safe to assume that few male communists would both sweep and fund-raise at the same time; nor, probably, would women of a different class background. That Parvatibai did both quite unselfconsciously is a reminder that for her, such labour was not demeaning.

Like Ushabai, Parvatibai was sharply conscious of class differences within the Party. But she had gained a political confidence that allowed her to transcend the ideology of caste and class which was so deeply honed in her from birth. Addressing the Party Congress in Bombay in 1946, she asked why it was that women workers, who had led such successful strike actions, 'were not at the forefront inside the Party [. . .]?' However, she went on to suggest that the problem lay not within the Party but in the fact that working-class women had not yet entered the Party in sufficient numbers. They were still victims of 'kitchen slavery', taking on the triple burden of mill work, political work and domestic labour. The Party newspaper reported this speech and described Parvatibai as 'the first woman Party member in Bombay'.[22]

But in her book, Parvatibai more openly indicts the hierarchies within the Party. She describes how, when she was arrested and taken to the police station, she noticed that Ahilya Rangnekar and B. T. Ranadive, the other comrades with

her at the time, both more educated and sophisticated than her, had taken the only available seats. She demanded the police officer give her a chair to sit on; when he retorted that there were not enough chairs, she asked him to give her his own. 'Bai, you are in jail' said the officer to her. Parvatibai replied that she had not yet been convicted of any crime: 'I too have a standing. You are not talking

FIGURE 4.2 Parvatibai Bhore

to Bai Bhore but a functionary of the Mill Workers Union' (97). She got a chair to sit on.

In prison, Parvatibai fought bitterly against the rule that assigned prisoners of different backgrounds to different classes of cells. She was sent to the 'C' class whereas the comrades she was arrested with got 'B' class. 'How are these classes decided?' she asked her jailor. 'Upon education and social standing', he replied. In prison, her assertion that she was organizer of the union carried no weight. Parvatibai refused to go into her cell, demanding that she be kept in the same place as Ahilya Rangnekar. Ahilya agreed to stay with Parvatibai in the inferior cell, but both women were sent to the 'B' cells. Once inside, however, Parvatibai writes that she was humiliated by her comrades, just like Ushabai had been. While she had no personal differences with Ahilya, the latter gave her a lot of trouble on account of their belonging to different factions. Parvatibai felt loyal to Dange, and thus aligned herself with what she calls the 'right' wing of the Party while Ahilya, like her elder brother B. T. Ranadive, belonged to the 'left' faction that was to become dominant in the Party:

> People in the left faction had troubled me to extract information about the right leaning faction. Ahilya was the in-charge of the cell. We would meet in prison according to our factions. After she realized that I wasn't submitting to them, they started humiliating me. They threw garbage over me. Threw water over my body. Nobody would include me during the meetings. They wouldn't let me talk to anyone. I read the history of Soviet Union seven times, sitting under a tree. They had even decided to bribe me, just so that they could extract information about my group. But I didn't budge.
>
> (99)

Parvatibai had close ties with Dange and stayed politically loyal to him through a period of intensifying factionalism within the Party. She often refers to him in reverential tones. At a meeting in Shivaji Park to felicitate Dange on his 75th birthday, sections of the crowd started shouting slogans in her honour:

> 'Hail Parvatibai Bhor! Bai Bhor red Salute!' [. . .] I stood up. I was standing on the stage confused. [. . .] I kept thinking about whether I deserved this. [. . .] Comrade Dange was like God for us. I am seven to eight years younger to him. And I had cleared only two grades in a Marathi medium school. I have never even dreamt that I would be honoured along with him. I feel amazed about it today. [. . .] The stage turned like a wheel and I was seeing my past life like a film. [. . .] Like a bobbin operating in the mill.
>
> (Bhore 2)

She recounts how important it was for her that Dange took a personal interest in women like herself. Once, when they were leaving by train for a Party conference,

Ushabai had a second-class ticket, while she and some other comrades had third-class seats: 'Comrade Dange suddenly showed up at the station asking for my ticket. He paid extra money and sent me in the second class along with Ushatai' (108).

In the late 1940s, the factionalism within the Party and the unions escalated, and both women describe themselves as caught within it. Parvatibai writes:

> I had differences with the people with whom I was once shoulder to shoulder. These differences were now out in the open. They had the majority. My fellow comrades have leveled accusations against me. They had me suspended. They passed negative reports about me. I had seen the red flag with a feeling of worship. Had even sacrificed the household duties for this. I was humiliated in the same space where I once earned respect. Perhaps that is why I was crying. I could tell these personal pains to Bhau (Patkar).
>
> (103)

Party factionalism was very painful for women of all classes. As I mentioned in the introduction, Manikunatala Sen described the split within the CPI as an event which drained her 'life-blood'. The Party had enabled women to enter into close relationships and friendships with men and women, friendships which otherwise be impossible for them. But these could also become a source and excuse for friction, as B. D. Parab, a Party and union worker, points out:

> There were many attacks on each other during the differences; even physical attacks. Patkar, Tambitkar and Parvatibai Bhor were all in the movement. Naturally, they were all close. It was nothing serious, then, there was no practice of seeing men and women differently in the Party. But when the Party began splitting, bad things were written about the three of them in the Party periodical, *Mashaal* (Torch). We had a system called self-criticism. In this, we had to write about our personal issues to the Party in writing. We were taught that everything was collective, and the individual was not important. Everyone was the same, everything together, but all this spoilt many people's lives.
>
> (Menon and Adarkar 205–6)

Parvatibai discovered that the same Party family that she had so admired as an alternative to her own, could become just as fractious and petty as the latter. But despite the death of a granddaughter and the loss of many comrades, she writes that she never lost her upbeat spirit or faith:

> I worshipped my life, why should then I get depressed (at this juncture)? I still retain the hope to change the fate of every rising day. Because I have firmly learnt from experience that history is created through the masses.
>
> (Bhore 120)

Both Ushabai Dange and Parvatibai Bhore had entered and worked in a political sphere –that of trade unions – where no middle-class women had yet trod. No matter how much middle-class women 'declassed' themselves, it was hard for them to be effective among workers. It is true that middle class communist women lost some of their privileges, and also willingly relinquished them, upon entering the Party. They fought for an expansion of the women's movement into new constituencies, breaking with liberal women's groups and also putting some pressure on the male leadership of the Party (as I will show in the next chapter). Some of them, like Godavari Parulekar, trod new ground by going into Adivasi forests, and organizing where even male comrades had not ventured. Nevertheless, within the Party, the differences between them and women like Ushabai and, even more so, Parvatibai, remained. Of course, it is true that neither Ushabai nor Parvatibai was a mill worker herself, but still, they were as distinct from the English-speaking Party cadres, and always conscious of this distinction. (It is worth noting that at the time of the first Party Congress in 1943, there were only seven female mill workers who were Party members.) As Parvatibai's son Vasant later observed,

> There are three levels among the communists. Some at the top whom you can't expect to live in a *chawl*. They do what it is possible for them to do. Then there were others who earned money and worked free of cost for the Party. The third category consisted of those like my mother, who was not very educated, who lived in a *chawl* in Lalbaugh and worked full-time for the Party. The middle-class women cadres and leaders were different from her. [. . .] The ways of middle-class women are completely different; even if they become communists, this cannot change. [. . .] The women who work in the mills also differentiate between the middle-class women and those who come from a working-class background. Everyone knew my mother.
>
> (Menon and Adarkar 134)

These class differences were not a matter of language or education alone. Whereas middle- and upper-class communist women were at pains to dress simply, Parvatibai thought it was absolutely fine for working-class people to aspire to better things:

> There was a women's meeting in Hindu colony. Hansa Mehta was presiding it. One woman had accused workers of wanting to live in luxury: 'They prefer to watch films sitting in the box (expensive seats), and want to wear nice clothes. They don't know who they are.' I was enraged upon hearing this. I said, 'a worker is a human like you. Why can't he sit in the box?' I pointed at Hansa Mehta and said, 'if a labouring woman feels like she should drape a sari like this [the one draped by Mehta], what's wrong?' I said this and atmosphere at the meeting transformed. Someone had to gather courage and had to ask these questions.
>
> (Bhore 91)

She reminds us that there can be a stifling morality attached to the cult of simplicity. The working-class women she describes are not ascetics at all:

> I met Saloo Bai from the Don Mill at a labouring woman's conference. I spoke in Hindi at this conference. There was also Banaa Tai Telin [telin is a caste name for those extract oil]. She would work in the mill and lead the movement. She would drink alcohol regularly. But during the Pune conference, she didn't even touch alcohol. Krishna Desai's wife too was a firebrand like this.
>
> (118)

This passage reminds us of the very different lifestyles and values that had to be accommodated within the communist ideal. Alcohol, for example, was considered a no-no for middle-class women virtually all over the country, but in many regions, poorer women did drink, and, of course, so did the rich and the foreign educated ones.

Some of the personal and public fights Ushabai and Parvatibai engaged in are today understood as feminist: the struggle for education, for the right to work, to marry after being widowed, to participate in politics, to be taken seriously as a political actor by one's family. Others, such as the battle for the right to strike, the right to dissent from a repressive political order, the right to better wages, and the right to lead men as well as women in these struggles, are too often bracketed away from the sphere of feminism. But, as their stories remind us, these were integrated battles, small victories on each front enabling breakthroughs in the other. Even though Ushabai and Parvatibai themselves do not explicitly do so, their struggles also question the conceptual separation of home and the world that has cast such an abiding spell upon the analysis of Indian women's history.

Notes

1 For an overview of the early years of unionization in the mills, see Chandavarkar (100–79).
2 A second edition was published in 1998 as *Ushakaal*.
3 See, for example, Madhukar.
4 Further references to *Pan Aikta Kaun* are to this first edition, unless otherwise noted. I am grateful to Milind Ranade and Rupali Bansode for their help with translations.
5 For a discussion of this book, see Seth (109–14).
6 Ramabai was one of the first to argue that nursing was a legitimate activity for upper-caste women. She also wrote an autobiography, *Amchya Ayushyatil Kahi Athvani*, published in English in 1938 as *Himself: The Autobiography of a Hindu Lady*.
7 For background information on the Kanpur Conspiracy Case, see Appendix 2.
8 On this retaliation, see Menon and Adarkar (156–57).
9 For a 1934 report about this strike and its connection with the Meerut Conspiracy Case, see Singh. For a more general account of anti-communist measures taken by the British government, see Manzer. For an account of labour union politics in the context of the anticolonial struggle, see Lieten.
10 Lieten suggests that at this point, in keeping with the opinions of the second-level leadership of the union, Ushabai advised workers to discontinue the strike (699). He also describes the strategies of the Congress to break working-class unity, and the resulting schisms within the GKU.
11 Dange's sentence was later reduced, on appeal, to three years.

12 Bitia Mills, later known as Phoenix Mills, employed about 1,200 women at the time.
13 *Gherao* literally means encirclement. It is a form of political action similar to picketing, where activists would prevent a management person from leaving until their demands were met.
14 I am grateful to Rupali Bansode and Kaustubh Naik for helping me with this translation.
15 On 2 October 1939, 90,000 workers went on a one-day strike to protest against India's being dragged into the war; some commentators have assessed that this was the 'first anti-war strike in the world working-class movement' (Krishnan, 11).
16 These differences simmered even when not expressed, and were often expressed obliquely; they are too complicated to summarize adequately here, but see Gupta.
17 Both Ushabai and Parvatibai Bhore talk about being harassed by those aligned with Ranadive, testifying to the deep differences between Dange and Ranadive, their public agreement on some issues notwithstanding. At this point in time, both Dange and Ranadive were interned at Deoli jail and agreed on a document (authored by Ranadive) that has become known as the 'jail document'; this argued that the Party should change its characterization of the second world war from an 'imperialist' to a 'people's war'. Later Ranadive was to argue that in implementing this line, the Party fell into 'right reformist' ways.
18 Lata Pratibha Madhukar is an activist in the Narmada Bachao Andolan and a national convener for the National Alliance of People's Movements.
19 For more on Bradley, see Appendix 2.
20 The word she uses is *prerana*, which would literally translate as inspiration. But I have used the word 'urge' which is more apt for her sentiment.
21 The others were S. V. Deshpande, onetime secretary of the GKU, who later became General Secretary of the AITUC, and S. G. Tambitkar who was active in the Young Workers' league and was later elected as an MLA.
22 *People's War*, 13 June 1943, p. 9.

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PLATE 1 Prakashvati (right) in European dress

(Courtesy: Anand)

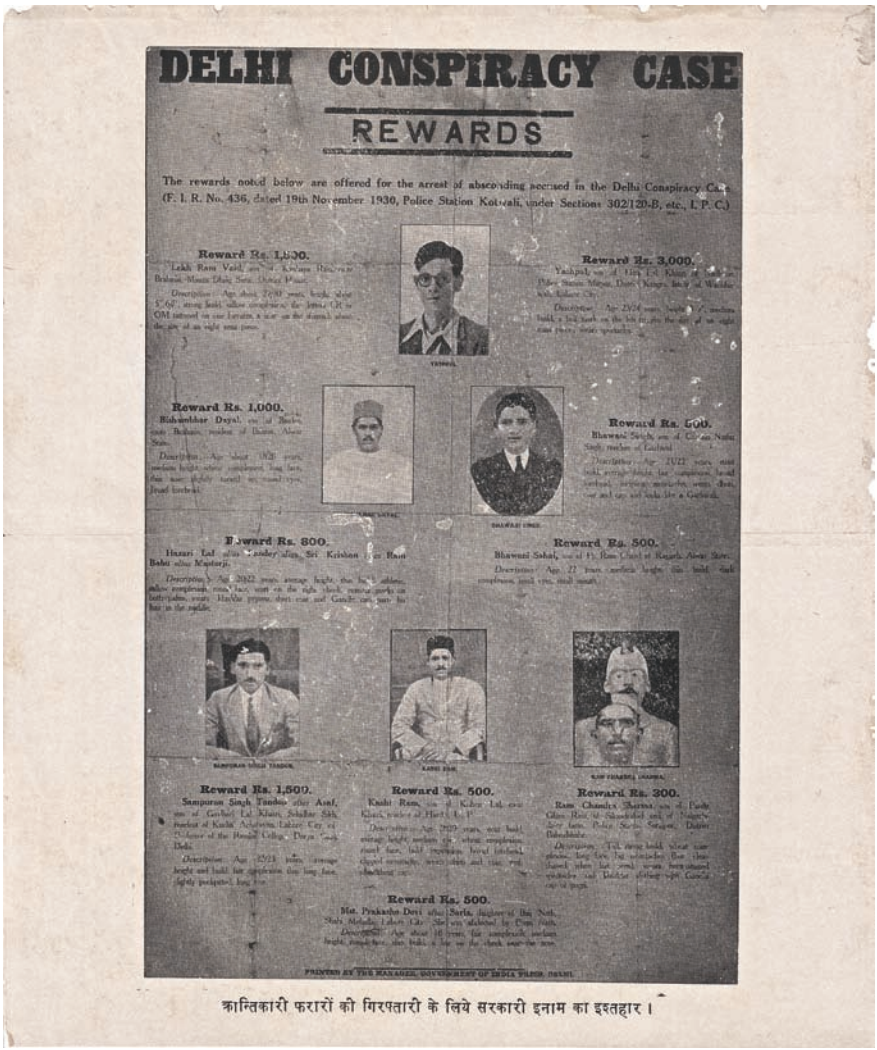
DELHI CONSPIRACY CASE
REWARDS
The rewards noted below are offered for the arrest of absconding accused in the Delhi Conspiracy Case (F. I. R. No. 436, dated 19th November 1930, Police Station Kotwali, under Sections 302/120-B, etc., I. P. C.)
Reward Rs. 1,500.
Reward Rs. 3,000.
Reward Rs. 1,000.
Reward Rs. 500.
Reward Rs. 800.
Reward Rs. 500.
Reward Rs. 1,500.
Reward Rs. 500.
Reward Rs. 300.
Reward Rs. 500.
PRINTED BY THE MANAGER, GOVERNMENT OF INDIA PRESS, DELHI.
क्रान्तिकारी फरारों की गिरफ्तारी के लिये सरकारी इनाम का इश्तहार।

PLATE 2 Poster announcing police reward for the capture of Yashpal and Prakashvati. It offers fifteen hundred rupees for Yashpal and five hundred rupees for 'Prakasho Devi alias Sarla' who was 'abducted by Prem Nath'

(Courtesy: Anand)

PLATE 3 Young Parvathi Kumaramangalam

(Courtesy: Parvathi Krishnan)

PLATE 4 Kalpana Joshi reading in the Bombay commune

(Courtesy: Gargi Chakravartty)

PLATE 5 Sunil Janah's photo of comrades at a picnic in Chembur hills, 1943

(Courtesy: Gargi Chakravartty)

PLATE 6 Rekha Jain, Reba Roy and Ruby Dutt of the Central Cultural Squad

(Courtesy: SAHMAT)

PLATE 7 Members of the Central Cultural Squad with puppet

(Courtesy: P. C. Joshi Archives, JNU)

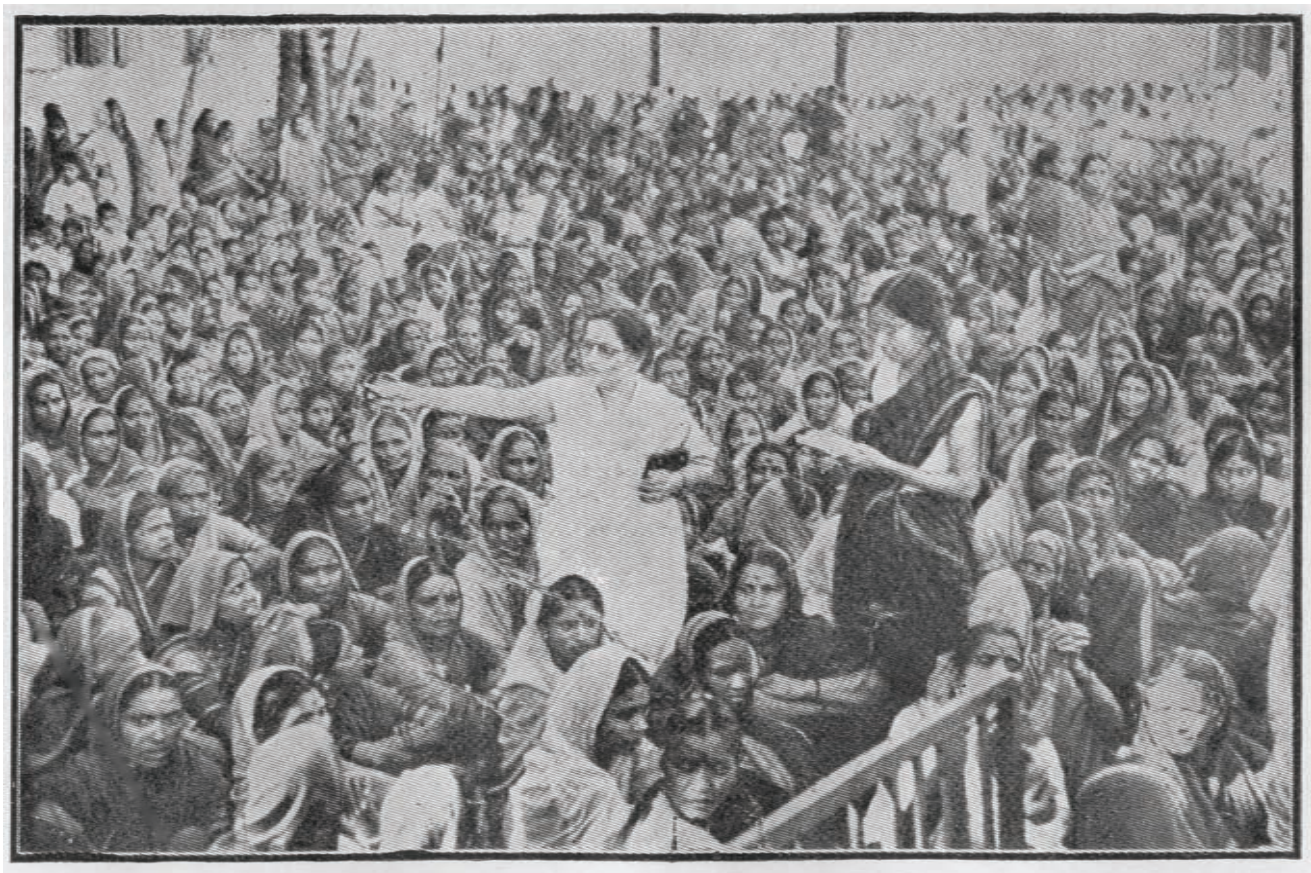

PLATE 8 Ushabai Dange addressing a meeting, 1940

(From Dange's *Pan Aikat Kaun*)

PLATE 9 Performance of *Bhooka Hai Bengal*

(Courtesy: SAHMAT)

PLATE 10 Communist Party woman pins a badge on a worker

(Photo: Sunil Janah. Courtesy: Swaraj Archive Collection)

PLATE 11 Vimla and Satyapal Dang

(Courtesy: Aastha Dang)

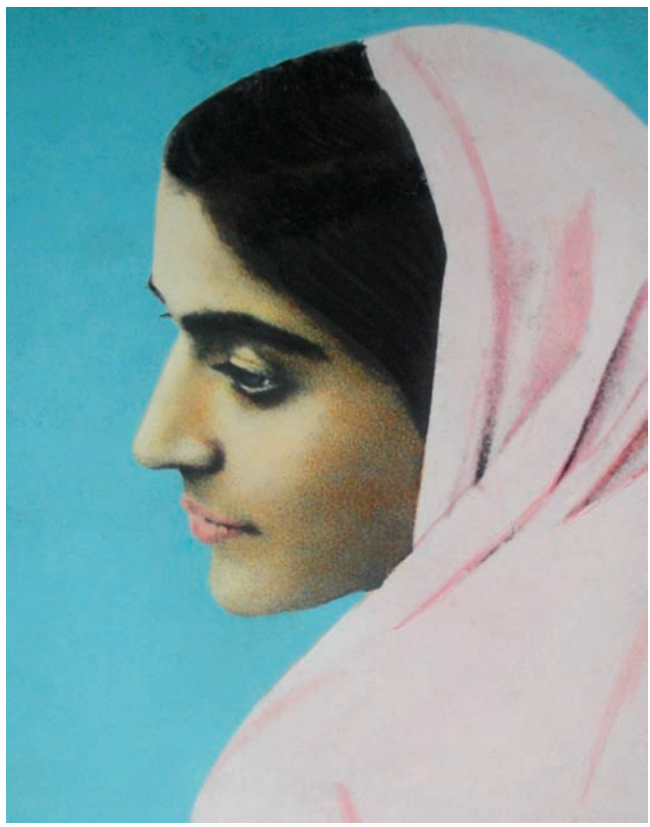

PLATE 12 Painting of Murtazai as a young woman

(Courtesy: Murtazai Shakeel)

PLATE 13 Usha Dutta Verma (right) performing with the Bengal IPTA squad

(Courtesy: Rahul Verma)

PLATE 14 P. C. Joshi with Cultural Squad members

(Courtesy: P. C. Joshi Archives, Jawaharlal Nehru University)

PLATE 15 Party meeting for women in a village

(Courtesy: P. C. Joshi Archives, Jawaharlal Nehru University)

PLATE 16 Kondapalli Koteswaramma

(Courtesy: K. Anuradha)

PLATE 17 Kondapalli Koteswaramma (left) performing in a burrakatha group

(Courtesy: K. Anuradha)

5

THE DANCE OF HUNGER

Even as the Bombay Commune was being set up, hunger was stalking many parts of wartime British India, including Orissa, Bengal, parts of the Madras Presidency, Maharashtra, Andhra, Bihar, several districts in UP (United Provinces), and Punjab. In 1942, shortly after emerging from underground activities, communist activists were caught up in redressing the food crisis, and organizing public rallies demanding controlled-priced food as prices rose and shortages became palpable. The worst off was Bengal, which was devastated by famine during 1942 and 1943; nearly four million people are estimated to have perished here from starvation and disease in the following three years.[1] The famine galvanized communists into action, both politically and culturally. In the face of colonial censorship, they were among the first to publicize the disaster. Their analysis of the famine anticipated Amartya Sen's groundbreaking book, *Poverty and Famines* (1981), which argued that famines are political not natural events, and that they have less to do with shortages of food than its unfair distribution. They spearheaded relief efforts, setting up food kitchens and shelters for those rendered destitute by the famine, while organizing political actions to demand rice at controlled rates.

Communist women were in the forefront of famine relief efforts, and their work catalysed the formation of a new kind of women's political organization – one which moved beyond the ambit of existing nationalist women's organizations, and simultaneously pushed the Communist Party to engage with women's political activities. But famine relief activities also cemented the formation and spread of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) and the Communist Party's Central Cultural Squad, as well as local cultural squads. The Bangalore unit of IPTA was formed in 1941, the Bombay unit in 1942, and the all India organization in May 1943. IPTA was not formally the cultural front of the Communist Party, but in practise it functioned like one. During the famine, the organization came into its own, as activists and artists graphically detailed the suffering the famine entailed, and, in the process,

shaped new forms of art, cultural performance, and political outreach. As they did so, they travelled to different parts of the country, forging new political and artistic ties among themselves as well as their viewers. For women activists, singers and actresses, these efforts allowed novel experiences – performing before enormous audiences; travelling to different parts of the country; training, rehearsing and living with each other and male comrades; and becoming part of experimental artistic endeavours that remain important landmarks in the history of public and political performance in India.

In this chapter I want to consider these two activities, the famine relief work of communists and the cultural work undertaken by IPTA during the famine, alongside each other. Very often the same women engaged in both activities. I will trace their work and examine how women were pictured in the writings and cultural productions of communists about the famine. As I shall show, communist representations of famine were deeply gendered; that is, they relied on stereotypical images of women (and indeed of men). But at the same time, communist women were managing to make several important breakthroughs – by forging a strong women's organization, by appearing on stage, and also by raising the issue of gender within the Party. By tracing these different but connected activities, we can reflect upon the complicated relationship between women and the Party during the 1940s and early 1950s.

These organizational and artistic endeavours took place during a period when the Party was both pursuing a convoluted national policy, and encouraging new and creative forms of outreach. It was working intensively with working-class and peasant populations, but was also riven with factionalism within. The Party's vacillating policy towards the Second World War made work extremely difficult for communist workers on the ground, and for those working for famine relief in particular. Therefore, it is necessary to give a brief account of this policy. In February 1942, after the Soviet Union had been attacked by Germany and joined the Allied forces in the second world war, the CPI reversed its own earlier policy, which had labeled the war as one between rival imperialist powers, had chastised the Congress Party for not pushing hard enough against the empire, and had called upon all Indians to make a final push against the British, 'the chief enemies of mankind'.[2] Now, the CPI announced that the Soviet Union had 'transformed the imperialist war into people's war' and that Party comrades should understand that

> the people's war is the straight and simple path to India's own liberation. [. . .] Don't enter into fine arguments about conditional or unconditional support. Pose the simple issue, either we take the peoples' war in peoples' hands or face death and destruction under Fascism.
>
> (Basu 333–47)

The Congress, in contrast, had launched its massive 'Quit India' movement in August 1942, and its leaders had been jailed even as the Communist Party had been legalized. As a result, the latter faced accusations of collaborating with the British government.

As Manikuntala Sen, an important Party organizer in Bengal, put it, 'we had said one thing yesterday, how could we start saying something else today? What else would people call us other than dalals (agents)?' (*Freedom* 64). In the meantime, Subhas Chandra Bose's increasingly popular Indian National Army (INA), had started military preparations against the British with Japanese help, but the CPI opposed the INA's activities, pointing out the dangers of Japanese fascism. This too was hard to explain to an increasingly anti-government populace; Manikuntala writes that

> we truly floundered in having to explain to the common people the international scenario. [. . .] Because of the antipathy to British rule, I heard people say, 'What's the harm in letting the Japanese come? At least the British louts would be thrown out.'
>
> (63)

She recalls that in Calcutta, people were 'as cold as icebergs', and once, 'from the second storey of a house, vegetable peels fell on our heads as Renu and I passed by' (66).

But despite the policy blunders of the communists during the war, the Party was attentive to the increasing economic grievances of the poor and therefore grew exponentially during this period – from 4,464 members in July 1942 to 15,563 in May 1943 (Basu 597). The vocabularies and tones of activists often differed from those used in Party meetings, publications or policy statements, and the strain of making these informal and formal discourses align was evident. Accused of being soft on the British, the Party revved up its claims of being 'patriotic' to a caricatured extent; Victor Kiernan recalls that

> critics made fun of the incessant repetition of the word 'patriotic' in the *People's War* where it became a sort of incantation. I was solemnly admonished by a Party spokesman in Lahore, on the occasion of a shoemakers' convention, not to underrate the patriotic spirit of the toilers, 'and of patriotic shoemakers in particular'.
>
> (Kiernan 69)

In this tricky situation, the Party developed its line of 'national unity for national defence and national government' which held that the struggle against British imperialism would be strengthened, rather than compromised, by a united and strong struggle against fascism (Overstreet and Windmiller 200). To this end, the Congress, the Muslim League, the communists and other patriots needed to come together. The CPI called for the release of Gandhi and other Congress leaders, and claimed that it was building solidarity among all patriotic forces. Not all communist activists were thrilled at having to adopt this line although few could openly dissent. Ushabai Dange says that she dutifully went for meetings in which she would give speeches saying, 'release Mahatma Gandhi and other nationalist leaders, and establish a national government' but did not feel 'excited' at having to do so (192).

The famine posed special challenges for such an agenda. British wartime policies were squarely responsible for the food shortages; indeed, a recent study argues that the famine was the result of deliberate policy decisions taken by Winston Churchill (Mukerjee, *Churchill's Secret War*). The colonial regime was certainly responsible, but even its indifferent and racist misgovernance is not the entire story. India's eastern borders became increasingly crucial to the colonial government after the fall of Hong Kong, Singapore, and Burma to Japan in 1942. Rice imports from Burma stopped, refugees from Burma poured in, and the threat of a Japanese invasion of India loomed large. The British government adopted a 'Denial Scheme,' whereby all available stocks of rice were to be acquired by it so that if the Japanese army invaded India, its troops could not be fed. On the contrary, the rice would feed Calcutta and its industrial labor force. Acute food shortages resulted as all available rice, acquired by force and at 'controlled' prices, went to government godowns. However, the price rise and shortages that followed would not have been possible without widespread hoarding and black marketing, both in Bengal and outside it. As rice was withheld from the market, wholesale prices rose from between 9 and 10 rupees per maund in November 1942 to over a hundred rupees in some districts later in the year (Kelleher 166).[3] A historian has suggested that to emphasize hoarding is to hold 'millions of people' responsible for famines, but that is not exactly right; in a situation of famine, only big traders can stock-pile without consuming, and this is exactly what happened in Bengal as even moderately well-off farmers slid into hunger and deprivation.[4]

This situation was enabled by complicity between the bureaucracy and the black-marketeers, even as they blamed one another for the crisis. Communist writers and activists exposed such connivance wherever possible (Sardesai 4–5). Moreover, as Janam Mukherjee points out, the nationalist leadership was unequal to the task of responding adequately to the famine, precisely because it was 'deeply beholden to the Indian industrial interests (reaping record profits in wartime Calcutta at the time)'. Therefore, Mukherjee argues, 'many of the policies and practices that precipitated famine in Bengal . . . met with little opposition from this same leadership' (*Hungry Bengal* 5). These are also the reasons why, as Amartya Sen puts it, by the middle of 1943, 'a moderate short-fall in *production* had [. . .] been translated into an exceptional short-fall in *market release*' (*Poverty and Famines* 76). By November 1943, CPI General Secretary P. C. Joshi bluntly called it a 'man-made famine' ('Behind the Man-made Famine' 1). Prices soared endlessly, and the government did not enforce any price control, resulting in mass starvation among the poor. Hunger increasingly crept up the economic ladder as well, but the worst affected were naturally those who had little to begin with. It is important to remember that even before the famine, millions of peasants under-consumed and lived on the brink of starvation.

British authorities were indifferent; they refused to invoke their own Famine Code of 1883 which obliged the government to provide relief to stricken areas. Until late in 1943, they chose not to recognize that there was a famine at all. The British press went along until Ian Stephens, the editor of *The Statesman*, flouted this silence by giving horrific details of the suffering and death, and bitterly critiqued the

administration. Madhusree Mukerjee's recent study of the famine notes Stephens's exceptionality:

> Until Stephens publicized it, the calamity in Bengal had been unknown to most of India and utterly unheard about in the rest of the world. In a bid to keep the news from leaking out, the Government of India had allegedly destroyed all but one of the five thousand copies of *Hungry Bengal*, a collection of sketches and reportage on the Midnapore famine.
>
> (*Churchill's Secret War* 175)

Hungry Bengal was the work of Chittaprosad, an artist and reporter who worked for *People's War*, the English-language newspaper of the Communist Party of India. Chittaprosad, or Chitta as his comrades called him, had become a 'whole-timer' of the Party in 1940, and later joined the commune in Bombay as part of the paper's editorial team. He was one of many communists who both called attention to the famine and also worked to counter its effects.

Today, these communist interventions have been all but forgotten, or are deliberately ignored; instead the allegation that communists were paralyzed in this period has gained ascendancy. For instance, Mukerjee only obliquely acknowledges that Chittaprosad was ahead of most other journalists in detailing the destruction in Bengal. Another recent book, Janam Mukherjee's *Hungry Bengal,* takes its very title from that of Chittaprosad's book, but also makes no mention of the analysis of the famine and the work done by communists in addressing the crisis of hungry Bengal.

Chittaprosad, P. C. Joshi, and other communist writers and artists documented the rural suffering as well as the urban misery of the poor, painting a chilling account of the mass starvation in the city and countryside. They did so even though censorship was imposed on both words and actions; Chittaprosad reported that the government refused to allow communist workers to hold public meetings to discuss the food crisis. Police took down posters that asked people to unite to fight famine, and threatened people with dire consequences if the posters were seen again. *People's War* reproduced vignettes and drawings capturing the devastation of the Midnapore region that Chittaprosad had previously published in various other communist publications. One of his heart-rending pictures shows a boy's body being eaten by jackals and dogs. In August 1943, *People's War* carried a report of hungry dogs attacking children as prey. It reported too that thousands of starving people were thronging into Calcutta. In September, the paper called these the 'queues of death' (Figure 5.1). It carried a story of a jackal biting off the limbs of a starving child, and of children being sold by parents for 2 rupees. After a six-week tour of Bengal, Joshi wrote a searing account of the famine which recounted how mothers were murdering their own children to save the latter from painful deaths by starvation, how young women were forced into the sex trade on a massive scale, how destitution and disease were rampant. 'Humanity', Joshi concluded, is being 'dehumanized' in Bengal (*Who Lives if Bengal Dies?* 7).[5]

Joshi had asked Sunil Janah, a young Calcutta photographer, to accompany him on this trip; Janah's pictures remain some of the most important visual accounts of the

PEOPLE'S WAR

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QUEUES OF DEATH

IN CALCUTTA

by

Somnath Lahiri

ON BUSY STREET

A Corpse ... ...

THE picture above is a ghastly sight—is it not? A dead body rotting on the ground under the shade of a tree. Flies buzzing on its face. Apparently uncared for and left to the wind and the rain. It was drizzling when the photograph was taken.

You would think it was a corpse washed up by the Burdwan flood. You are mistaken. It is a dead body lying on the footpath of Circular Road just opposite Sealdah station, the busiest street in the city of Calcutta. Hundreds had passed even while the camera was clicking.

ing its meals—on the streets of Calcutta. A middle-aged man, his wife, children and a relative. An umbrella was their only cover against the rain, the sun, and the night and maybe against the demoralisation of a country which looks on in utter helplessness at the misery of its sons and daughters.

The group looked "healthy." That was because they had come out on the streets only the day before. They were land-labourers in the village of Magra in Hugli district. They generally have no work during Jan's season, this year they had no food either. Some two months ago they migrated to Calcutta in search of food. Together with a

ial firms have not yet had to starve. From the factories and the firms they manage to get some rice (ranging from 5 seers to 24 seers a week) at cheap rates, supplement it with a little buying at the controlled shops and somehow carry on.

The hawkers, shopkeepers and all those who don't get any ration are the hardest hit.

15/– a maund) to needy families with an income not exceeding Rs. 200/- per head and the *Janaraksha* (People's Food and Defence Committee) volunteers were taking a census of such people. The head of a family of eight or nine, having an income between Rs. 150/- to 200/- simply flew at the volunteers—"What business have you to ask about my income?" It was patiently explained how the relief scheme would help him in these acute days and why he should give the necessary figures.

"I don't want any charity from

Subhas Babu doing either, his promises of an army to kick the British out also came to nothing! The Communists? Well, they *are* active and putting in some good work in the Janaraksha Samities but they are pro-government, aren't they?"

"But is there nothing to be done!" he was asked.

"To be done! Well, we can *die* —nobody objects to that!"

* * *

He is not unpatriotic or pro-Jap. He is only hopeless and bitter.

FIGURE 5.1 Queues of Death report in *People's War* with Chittaprosad's sketch

famine; he recalled that these photographs, along with Chittaprosad's sketches, and Joshi's 'impassioned reportage [. . .] created a sensation and made Chitta and me famous overnight' (Janah 9, 10). Janah and Chittaprosad both moved to the Bombay Commune, became part of the *People's War* editorial team, and their visuals began to regularly accompany news reports and analyses in *People's War* so that, as Janah later put it, 'the Party paper became the first, among the Indian new media, to use the "picture-story"' (15). Other artists such as Sudhir Khastgir also offered some of his pictures for publication in the paper.

As is the case with other famines, such as the one in Ireland in 1845, both the analyses and the representations of the Bengal famine were deeply gendered.[6] The Famine Inquiry Commission and Department of Anthropology in Calcutta claimed that twice the number of men than women died in the Bengal famine (Kellher 168; Roy 399).[7] Other more casual observers echoed this view, which remained commonplace in many accounts of the famine. This imbalance in the rate of deaths of men and women has since been questioned; Amartya Sen pointed out that there were more men than women in the population as a whole at that time, which suggests that women had *less* rather than more access to food than men during the famine. Even in normal times, they already consumed less on a daily basis. It is therefore entirely plausible that, as Parama Roy suggests, 'food was deliberately channelled [sic] towards young and middle-aged adult married males [. . .] and withheld from dependents' including

women, landless (usually lower-caste) agricultural workers, and children (398). Manikuntala Sen sensed this, writing in her autobiography that 'the cry of "*Phan dao*" the voice of the peasant, the grower of rice, was unbearable. Soon the ultimate victim of hunger was the peasant woman' (69).[8] Bina Agarwal and others have calculated that

> although excess mortality (the absolute and proportionate increases in mortality attributable to famine) was higher among males than females, the estimated absolute number of famine deaths during the critical year of 1943, and the absolute increase in mortality rates attributable to the 1943 famine, were greater in women than in men in the 20–40 age group.

Contemporary reports by communists also noted that that a higher proportion of those made destitute were women; this too is confirmed by recent feminist scholarship (Agarwal 161).

Many women on the streets of Calcutta had been deserted or turned out by their husbands. Kanak Mukerjee, a young communist organizer, confirmed that

> the majority of those in relief kitchens and camps are women, since the men have rushed to the villages in the hope of getting some job in the reaping of *aman* [winter crop]. The government is closing down many of the kitchens, leaving women vulnerable to pimps and goondas.
>
> ('Dishonour' 5)

One woman had sold her 5-year-old daughter, Mukerjee observed, and, after the skimpy meal 'they get out of the kitchen, the women openly ask for the soldiers' camps where they go for prostitution' (5). There was a grotesque rise in prostitution during the famine. Two months earlier, P. C. Joshi had observed that few among the women on urban streets were young because

> Young wives or unmarried girls are inside the brothels. The story is very simple. The pimps surround the destitute family as it reaches Calcutta. After a few days knocking about, the mother herself hands over the daughter or the daughter-in-law. [. . .] My estimate is that about 50,000 from Calcutta's 1,25,000 destitutes alone have gone into brothels, 1 in 4 of them being young girls.
>
> (*Who Lives if Bengal Dies?* 6)

The novelist Ela Sen estimated that the number was 30,000 (Keneally 56). Joshi concluded that 'the people of Bengal are threatened with physical extinction and moral collapse' (9). As Bhabani Bhattacharya's 1954 novel, *He Who Rides a Tiger,* memorably put it:

> Two great hungers had struck the land of Bengal in the wake of war: the hunger of masses of people uprooted from their old earth and turned into beggars, and the hunger of the all-owning few for pleasure and more pleasure, a raging fever

> of the times. Uprooted women with their own kind of hunger had to soothe the other hunger, had to cool the raging pleasure-fever with their bodies.
>
> (53)

For activists, it was more feasible to address the first kind of hunger. Manikuntala Sen and Kanak Mukerjee were among the group of communist women who set up relief kitchens that fed 1,100 people daily in Calcutta by September 1943. But realizing that it was hardly possible to save people by feeding them gruel, they simultaneously launched a movement to force the government to bring down the price of rice and open ration shops. Then they had to fight to ensure that poor women would have access to them; Manikuntala recalled that:

> Hundreds of men and women from the villages rushed into Ballygunge Station by the 3 am train to collect rice. On hearing the clamour from our homes, we too would get there at that time, make them stand in queues, and when the shop opened in the morning make sure they obtained the rice. We had to fight with the shopkeepers on their behalf regularly.
>
> (72)

Their work attracted sympathizers who donated both money and food, enabling them to set up canteens and food kitchens as well as homes for destitute women.

While they were organizing relief efforts, pickets, and camps, these women activists lived hand to mouth themselves: Manikuntala writes that 'the price of rice had risen from Rs. 4 or Rs. 5 a maund to Rs. 28. It became difficult to procure food for ourselves and on many a day nothing was cooked' (71). Manorama, one of Manikuntala's comrades, had two young children who also lived on the edge of starvation. One day, Manikuntala recalls, she came back to Calcutta Commune with a single hard-won loaf of bread to find the children still unfed; on such occasions, the meager rations went to feed them while the adults remained hungry.

Ultimately, Manikuntala and her comrades realized, all relief efforts would have to involve action on the part of poor women themselves. They organized a large number of poor peasant women and managed to lead them into a working session of the State Legislative Assembly, where they demanded access to rice at controlled rates. Manikuntala writes that 'such a thing had never happened before' (72). The legislators were shocked into some action, and the peasant women were all given two seers of rice each. Ultimately 16 fair price shops were also opened; thus, Manikuntala points out, it was peasant women themselves who were behind the opening of the first fair price shops in the country. News of these political actions was suppressed, although communist papers reported them and the international press picked up on their reports. It was out of such political efforts that communist women had the idea of setting up a women's organization that would not be limited to educated or rich women, as was the case with the All India Women's Congress, the first major women's organization in India in which communist women also worked. Hence the Mahila Atma Raksha Samiti (MARS) was born. In order to facilitate outreach and

provide an ongoing platform for women to represent themselves, the organization ran a monthly journal called *Gharey Baire* which included the writings of their activists and was staffed entirely by women.[9] The organization spread all over Bengal, intensifying its work among very poor women. In conjunction with communist women from other parts of the country, MARS continued to work among the women who were among the worst affected in the famine.

The Party was justifiably proud of MARS, whose activities were regularly featured in Party newspapers. Even so, these articles often described the women's political activities as subsidiary to the work of men, or to the real work of the Party. When poorer rural women were drawn into the movement – as in Howrah district where 1,500 women from 'backward villages' attended a communist meeting – *People's War* commented that Bengali and Punjabi women, who had remained 'backward' despite the 'revolutionary activities of the men of Bengal and the Punjab', were finally becoming politicized because of their 'realization' that they were 'facing utter destruction of family life itself' ('Women of All Classes'). Apart from the fact that this pronouncement erases those histories of female political participation in Bengal and Punjab that are the subject of the first two chapters, it suggests that women are roused only when there is a crisis facing the family, hardly a testament to either the political capacity of women, or the appeal of communism for them.

The same report does suggest a connection between national and domestic economies – 'Just as "National Crisis is a crisis in the Kitchen", so is National unity, yet in embryo, a unity in and for the Kitchen.' The first part of the sentence is clear enough –the war policy and the famine have resulted in a crisis of food that is devastating the family. The next part of the sentence – 'National unity, yet in embryo, a unity in and for the Kitchen' – needs some unpacking. As mentioned earlier, the idea of 'National Unity' was advanced as the Party tried to negotiate the slippery terrain of its convoluted war policy. Nationalists across the political and religious spectrum, it argued, needed to unite to defeat both the imperialists and the fascists. The *People's War* report suggests that joint action between Congress, the Muslim League, itself and other 'patriots' is essential to ensure adequate food supply to the people, *and* that such a front will be forged '*in* the Kitchen'. Here 'Kitchen' does not refer to a space within the home but rather, the food committees, the political actions for food, and the public kitchens in which starving people were being fed. It was communist women who had clearly forged such a *national* unity. But instead of acknowledging that organizational effort, the report suggests that the women were acting to save their families almost without realizing the larger import of their actions.

This was precisely the tone in which the astonishing success of MARS was assessed in other articles in *People's War*; here is one from May 23, 1943:

> Just about a year, or even six months ago there was hardly any women's organization in India. Today in one province alone the women have built up an organization not only 22,000 strong but with a rich and glorious history of gruelling struggles for food and A.R.P. [Air Raid Protection], of huge mobilisation and marches, of growing determination to save their 'izzat'

> [honour] and their motherland from the invaders' lust, of inspiring their menfolk to unite and fight for National Government and National Defence. [. . .] Behind this miraculous growth [. . .] is the inspiring story of the activities of about a hundred patriotic Communist girls [. . .] they have brought in the Congress woman, the *bhadralog* lady, the Muslim League mother, and the wives and daughters from the slums and farms.
>
> ('Bengal's Women' 3)

Because the famine was intimately connected with the fear of a Japanese invasion, in communist writings (by men and women) there was a routine slippage from one threat to the other. The threat of 'Japs' and the threat of prostitution resulting from hunger morph into a composite assault on women's 'honour'. The women's political work was rooted in food relief, but the report suggests that it stemmed from a desire to save their own 'honour' and that of their motherland (these were terms that were shared with the political vocabulary of mainstream nationalism). Even as the paper acknowledges that communist women are building the national unity which the Party thought so necessary for establishing the right government and mounting the most effective defence of India, it describes their achievement as inspiring *men* to 'unite and fight' for these aims.

However, as noted earlier, the vocabularies and tone of activists often differed from those used in Party meetings, publications or policy statements. When MARS leaders like Manikuntala or Renu Chakravartty write about their activities both then and retrospectively, they rarely mention subjects like national unity; rather they describe the urgency of organizing food relief and opening schools, of the need to help child widows to embrace a new life, and of the importance of imparting skills like sewing so that women could earn some money. They describe how their daily activities included aiding those who needed medical care, and even intervening in marital discord. Manikuntala recalls how some people within the Party would compare such 'constructive work' to that of organizations like the Ramakrishna Mission (a Hindu religious and philanthropic body), and ask, 'Will this lead to revolution?' She drily comments, 'Then how did all these women become members of the Communist Party?' (98).

It was hard to craft an agenda that moved beyond the paradigm of 'social work' which could draw women in, address their daily concerns, and also politicize them. Till today the relationship between social work (understood as giving succour) and political work (as in raising consciousness) is a vexed one; Manikuntala's sarcasm underlines that there is no necessary cleavage between them, and that MARS built its base among poorer women by extending care and social services, while simultaneously building awareness about the political conditions that had led to starvation. Manikuntala was curious about how communist women organized in other countries; being particularly impressed with the Italian Party's methods of ensuring outreach among every family in a community; she reported them to her own comrades 'but no one paid any attention; it would have been well if they had' (99). The result was that Party slogans of serving the common people were not translated into practice, unlike in the case of MARS.

Party leaders – none of whom were women – were not convinced about the methods of MARS activists. Both Manikuntala Sen and Renu Chakravartty told Party leaders that women's problems needed to be addressed along with problems of economic exploitation and political oppression. They argued that 'meeting times should be convenient to women, something should be done to free them from house work', and that attention should be paid to 'women's complaints about men's beatings, drinking and taking away women's earnings' (Forbes 215). While many communist men were sensitive to these issues, it was a different matter to persuade them all about the necessity of such domestic crises being translated into Party policies. Thus, as Geraldine Forbes observes, 'communist women argued unsuccessfully within the Party for a programme that would encourage peasant women to defy their husbands' (215). Of course, peasant women themselves were not always easy to persuade about the feasibility of such a programme; Manikuntala writes that when organizers like her said, 'All right, suppose a law is laid down stating that men had no right to beat their wives, how would that be?' The women simply laughed. But when we said, 'What if there is a law that forbids everyone to marry twice?' all the women were pleased' (126).

Manikuntala Sen describes her encounter with a beautiful 13-year-old who rowed her around on the waterways that connected the villages in that particular area. Upon discovering that she was a child widow, Manikuntala decided that

> Bimala would have to become one of our workers. [. . .] Those taboos would have to be got rid of. She was indeed able to break the norms because the Communist Party made it possible for her to return to a normal life.

The child grew up to 'become Bimala Majhi, the wife of one of our leading peasant leaders and have a family and children of her own' (*Freedom* 93). But Bimala Majhi was much more than the wife of a peasant leader. She was herself an important leader of the Midnapur district during the militant Tebhaga movement of 1946, which demanded for peasants a two-thirds share of the crop they grew, instead of the one-third that they received at the time. It was Bimala who mobilized women and organized them, and she who led peasants to destroy the threshing floors of the *jotedars* (rich peasants) and to sell the landlords' share of the harvest. Bimala also suggested, in a 1986 interview, that they had stopped wife-beatings in large areas during the movement. Hunted by the police, she went underground; when she was eventually captured, 140 cases were instituted against her, she was confined to a cage for a month, and imprisoned for two and a half years. None of this is discussed by Manikuntala when she describes the Tebhaga movement, even though she briefly acknowledges Bimala's leadership as evidence that 'peasant women were equal partners in the struggle' and later also mentions that when she herself was imprisoned, Bimala and her small son were also in the same cell (163, 199, 205). I do not think Manikuntala Sen was deliberately downplaying the role of Bimala Majhi but, despite Manikuntala's own differences with the male Party leadership, her manner of narration shares something of the established codes and priorities of the Party. While it is

simply untrue that upper-class and upper-caste communists did not include tribal, poor peasant, and Dalit comrades in their ranks, as is often alleged today, it is a fact that there remained a distance between them.

The latter is perhaps not surprising; even upper-class and upper-caste communist women had an uphill task establishing their credentials in a period when there was absolutely no theoretical discussion of women's issues by the Party. For instance, in the Manifesto of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, published on January 23, 1944 there is not a single word about women, even though this was a period when MARS's work at least partly accounted for the rapid growth of the Party despite its convoluted political line.[10] Leaders such as P. C. Joshi were extremely encouraging of women, but they could also show great insensitivity towards them. Manikuntala Sen bitterly recalls a huge public meeting of about two thousand people after a hugely successful peasant conference in Netrakona (now in northern Bangladesh), which she and her colleagues had slaved to organize. At this meeting, P. C. Joshi 'suddenly began to criticize the women members severely. We were all stunned. We had worked so hard for the conference, for such a long time, what grave mistake could we have committed?' One of Joshi's many accusations was that the women comrades had not interacted enough with the peasant women. The women heard him 'with our heads bent,' 'truly upset' because the criticism was aired in public at a meeting organized to thank the public for their support. Many women workers wanted Manikuntala to protest, but as she admits,

> I had been taught to accept whatever the party leader told me and not to protest. Moreover, we had a great regard for Comrade P.C. Joshi. We, the workers of the Women's Front, had been trained by him to do the work of the Front, and were proud that we owed its success to him.
>
> (*Freedom* 145)

Joshi repeated his criticism at a provincial committee meeting of the Party; Manikuntala writes that Kanak Mukerjee, who had worked as a whole-timer from her student days on, was 'completely demoralized' and resigned from whole-time work, and it 'took [Manikuntala herself] a long time to regain confidence in myself' (146). Although Manikuntala reflects on how such dangerous such obedience to Party leaders can be, she does not explicitly critique the gendered mores of Party leaders.

But in practice, I have suggested, the MARS did achieve an expansion on both fronts – extending the scope of women's organizations from the middle class into poorer women, and establishing the importance of women's organizations within the Communist Party.[11] By the early 1940s, parallel efforts were afoot in other parts of the country. Hajra Begum recalled in an interview that in Punjab, there was a Women's Self-Defence League along the lines of MARS, that organized women to demand ration shops, opened work centres and literacy classes for poor women, and also supported strikes in industrial areas. Here too cultural squads were an important way to organize women: 'we sang songs; we organized plays; we went to villages; we had kisan women in thousands coming to our meetings' (113–14). In Andhra,

Dr. Acchamamba organized 'a huge organization of women numbering two lakhs or so for that area'. In Bombay, communists had been organizing working-class women for much longer, as discussed in the previous chapter. In many places, communist women had begun to put pressure on the upper-class bias of the All Indian Women's Conference (AIWC) by demanding a 'four-anna membership, mass membership for women'. But Hajra Begum was the one who, within the CPI,

> raised this question of organizing women on [an] all-India basis. I said: Why do we not have it? Why does not the party take an interest in this and [in] these groups [that] are coming into being? What are we doing about it? Then we had a meeting, what we call a faction meeting, in which from Bengal and other places all the women came together and they said: yes, we should have an all-India organization of women which should not be a Communist women's organization, but it should be an organization of women from the working class, the peasantry, the lower middle-class, teachers etc., and not dominated by these Ranis, Maharani's, the Begum of Bhopal and the like.
>
> (113–14)

Most male leaders opposed a separate women's organization; as Vidya Munshi later noted, they 'did not want mass organizations other than the class based organizations, trade unions and peasants' organizations to be formed'. When E. M. S Namboodiripad supported the demand for a separate women's organization and circulated a paper emphasizing the need to take up issues such as public baths and lavatories in rural areas, it was sarcastically referred to as the 'latrine document' within the Party (quoted in Dutt and Munsi 12). Also, according to Hajra Begum, many men felt that a separate organization for women would have adverse effects within the Party, arguing that 'women were already segregated and if they were taken away more and more from the party, this would isolate them more and they would never develop properly' (142). Note the word 'develop' here, which implies not just women's backwardness, but also that such backwardness would be entrenched if women worked politically with other women. Hajra Begum acknowledges that

> Even I was not clear about it [the issue]. I used to keep quiet when they said, 'you want to separate women and then they will never join the Communist Party because they will say that they have got a separate organization'.
>
> (142)

But, as she pointed out, the Bengal famine changed the debate on this question; in Bengal, 'the movement for a women's organization almost spontaneously developed and people realized that unless we took the leadership in our hands, it would go in the hands of the wrong people'.

Hajra Begum, as well as other women, including Sarla Sharma, Perin Romesh Chandra, and Renu Chakravartty, made their case in the pages of the Party paper as

they wrote about women's activism. But almost as if to prove the point their male colleagues were making, rarely were women allowed to write on *other* issues in these papers; thus, women's organizing was simultaneously given some space in the communist movement and was ghettoized within that space. Looking back, Hajrah Begum concluded that this was partly the women's fault:

> Unfortunately, because we have, throughout our lives, been segregated, we even in the party tend to segregate ourselves. [. . ..] I think this is one of the basic things which has been done wrong and men never feel that they are responsible for the women's movement.
>
> (164)

Hajrah Begum articulates problems that remain central to left and feminist movements today – are 'women's issues' a 'concern only for women'? What *are* 'women's issues' and how do they intersect with issues that are central to communists? What on the other hand, are *poor* women's issues, which tend to get left out in women's organizations that lack a left perspective? Because MARS developed in the crucible of famine, it was the first organization in India to explicitly raise these issues, even if it was not able to articulate all the answers.

*

On December 5, 1943, at the height of the devastation wrought by the famine, Chittaprosad presented a sketch and a poem in *People's War*. The sketch depicted a peasant woman from Satkania dying in the Chittagong Relief Hospital. The poem, entitled 'Forgive Me', was written in voice of the dying woman, 'translated freely from the Chittagonian dialect'. In it, the peasant woman addresses other 'women of my land' and looks back at her life, past prosperity, and secure family life, describing how she once 'had cheeks like champa flowers' and was 'proud, a beauty, the sweetheart of her husband'. The poem tells a tale of class exploitation and peasant pauperization: the husband is forced to sell all his paddy, and within a month has also to sell his bullocks; when the landowners 'crashed into my houses for taxes unpaid', she had to sell her jewellery. Her husband dies of hunger-induced dropsy, and 'there in our village, there was no place left for me'. She shrivels into 'skin over a skeleton' and has no milk left for her baby. Her 'modesty' had 'fled long ago,' as she, refusing to give up hope, 'sold my body to the goondas' ('Forgive me, O mothers and sisters/ Forgive me, O society!' she begs). But she still could not feed herself or her children, and had to throw a dead son's body into the river. Now, disease ridden and shunned because of her septic ulcers, she asks why she has been abandoned: 'Where are you? Mothers and sisters of Chittagong/ I am a woman like you.'

The mother who could not feed her children was an iconic figure in journalistic and literary representations of the Bengal famine. Parama Roy observes that

> literary depictions, journalistic accounts, and newspaper photographs [. . .] return repeatedly to certain stock images: the mother unable to breast-feed

> her child, the infant suckling at the breast of its dead mother, a woman selling, abandoning, or destroying her child, the young rural woman enticed into prostitution in order to stave off the pangs of famine.
>
> (394)

Like Chittaprosad's poetic ventriloquism of a dying woman's complaint, many of these representations juxtaposed the present day 'shame' of womanhood with a once idyllic time. (I should note that such vignettes were largely produced by men). They indicated the scale of the tragedy by invoking the extraordinary virtue and self-sacrificing nature of Bengali Hindu women (Roy 400). Such depictions could also veer on the grotesquely pornographic; here is T. K. Das, who carried out a widely-cited Calcutta University survey of those pauperized by famine, describing a woman's emaciated body:

> She was not more than 25 years of age yet there was no womanly breast. Only two nipples dangled from two parched sheets of skin from which everything else seemed to have dried up. Her hair had become matted: perhaps they were not attended since she had left home. Her eyes had sunk into the sockets, but they had not yet lost their lustre. Indeed they had an unusual glow which was the outward indication of her great determination to survive this catastrophe, most probably for her little children.
>
> (5)

The bourgeois press's zeal to produce images along these lines was satirized in *Nabanna* (The New Harvest), a play written by communist playwright Bijon Bhattacharya and directed by him and Shombu Mitra in October 1944.[12]

With over 40 performances, *Nabanna* became one of the most successful productions of the recently established Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA). *Nabanna* charts the travails of a peasant family during the famine, portraying both its inner dynamic, as well as its interactions with black-marketeers and their local agents within the village, and with profiteers and sexual traffickers in the city. In a city park where destitute people have gathered, well-dressed photographers are seeking suitable models for pictures that will boost circulation of their newspapers. Two of them gleefully spot a beggar woman with a baby who is ideal, but for her grim face. One photographer tells the other that if they could coax 'just one bit of smile' from the woman, they could 'title her picture the Madonna of Bengal', which would surely double their paper's circulation (Bhattacharya, *Nabanna* 42).[13] They manage to get her to smile by giving her some money, and the instant the picture is taken, summarily dismiss her: 'You go now, go, go! You got the money, no? Ok, go!' Next, they alight on Prodhan Samaddar, an old man and the central figure in the play, who, they surmise, will be perfect as 'the Great Patriarch', Prodhan goes along with the photographers, takes money from them, but also offers a canny and politically astute commentary on their enterprise:

> The picture will be published in newspaper! [. . .] You will sell it?[. . .] You'll give me money? Give me. Give me money.[. . .] What if I pose with this

> earthen pot? It will look good [. . ..] Shoot, shoot a picture of the skeleton. [. . .] Go sell your picture of the skeleton!
>
> (44)

Janah and Chittaprosad carefully eschewed the 'lurid sensationalism' that critics have identified in other pictures splashed in *The Statesman*, *The Hindustan Standard* and *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (Roy 403).[14] One of Janah's rare shots of a starving young mother with her baby, taken during the famine in Andhra, offers a comment on the kind of pictures satirized in *Nabanna*. Here the woman with matted hair looks straight at the camera with an accusing even militant expression. She is destitute but no Madonna. One of his iconic pictures of the famine featured a very old woman; behind a copy of this picture, he scribbled 'The face of famine'.

Even so, Janah later confessed that he did not

> relish, to this day, the fact that I earned my early fame from the grim business of photographing the starving, the dying, and the dead victims of the dreadful famine . . . my only consolation was that our reportage brought the unfortunate victims of this man-made famine some long overdue attention, and may have prodded relief efforts.
>
> (10–11)

Despite his attempts to eschew sentimentalism, the experience

> was very distressing because I felt like doing things other than taking photographs. The camera is, of course, a kind of symbol of prying curiosity. People were starving and dying and I was holding a camera to their faces, intruding into their suffering and grief. I envied people who were involved in relief work because they were at least doing something to relieve the people's distress. It was a very harrowing experience, but I also felt that I had to take photographs. There had to be a record of what was happening, and I would do it with my photographs.
>
> (quoted in Ramachandran)

Many activists primarily engaged in relief work also had to record and represent what they were witnessing for Party newspapers and other publications. Women comrades did not stop with presenting images of women as suffering victims but juxtaposed them, not with the figures of 'unnatural' women which, as Roy notes, proliferated in the press, but with portraits of women as activists. For example, Kanak Mukerjee's article, 'Save From Dishonour Your Bengali Sisters', appeals to the public for 'all the help they can give us in this patriotic task of saving Bengal's womanhood' (5). Mukherjee too sees the famine as a blot on national honour because it renders women sexually vulnerable. But at the same time, she asserts that MARS is 'creating a very militant, entirely new type of womanhood among the peasants, who up to now were backward and ignorant'. Mukerjee gives the example of a MARS leader, an 'elderly

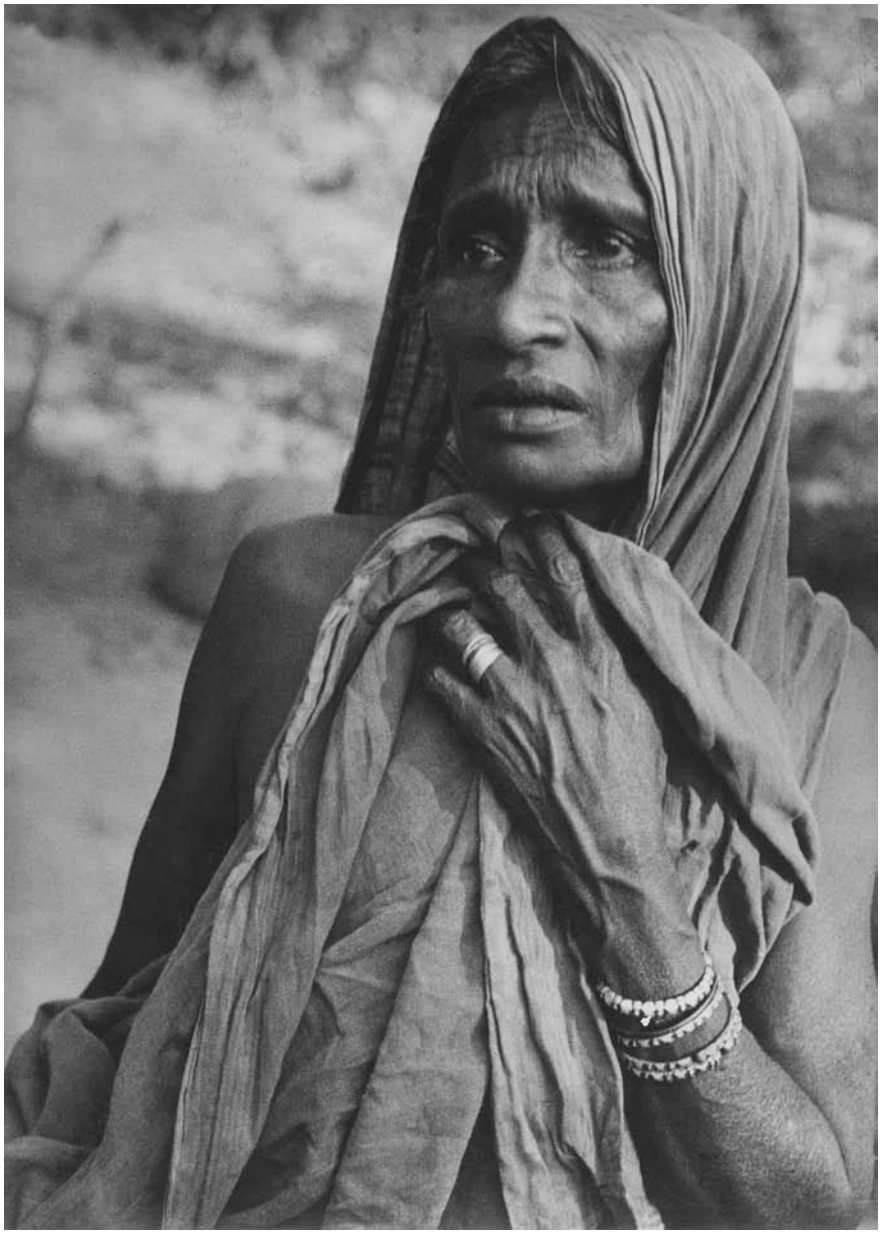

FIGURE 5.2 'The face of famine'. Picture by Sunil Janah

(Courtesy: Gargi Chakravartty)

peasant woman' who gathered over a hundred others to confront a landlord who had beaten up a worker of the group.

Like Mukerjee's article, communist cultural representations of the famine frequently used the dominant tropes of suffering womanhood and imperilled female honour, but, unlike that article, not all of them complicated or critiqued such images. Even fewer engaged with women's activism that was proliferating at the time – despite its satiric commentary on the 'Bengali Madonna', for example, *Nabanna* does not do so. Indeed, the play is deeply invested in middle-class Bengali ideals of maternity and femininity, as is evident from the brief appearance of Prodhan's wife Panchanani. The old woman comes in mumbling, 'No shame is left in women', and then tells her nephew, 'Something will have to be done about this. Will all the women have to go and sit in the forest for hours? What is happening? Have all the men in the nation died?' (Bhattacharya, *Nabanna* 2). Panchanani suggests that the crisis unleashed by the famine is not hunger but a complete disregard of women's 'shame' (a euphemism for their chastity). Women are forced to go hide in forests from those who would prey on them sexually because there are no men to protect them. Her husband caustically reminds her that endurance is also a virtue for Indian women: 'put up with it. You have been doing so for ages, now continue to do so; seal your lips and do not utter anything or it will be a sin' (3). Panchanani erupts at husband and nephew:

> One can put up with suffering of the body. That doesn't matter. But what about shame – the jewel of women in your land, of which you are so proud? And the most important thing – women's honour? The honour of womankind? Why are you silent?
>
> (4)

The old woman's speech portrays the chastity (understood as honour) of individual women and the honour of the motherland as interchangeable. Parama Roy rightly suggests that this 'harangue' situates the famine 'as a crisis of failed masculinity' (404).[15]

However, it would be an oversimplification to suggest that the play itself does no more than endorse Panchanani's suggestion. Her nephew retorts: 'Honour! She's worried about honour! Where life itself has become dishonourable, to worry about women's honour'!' (Bhattacharya, *Nabanna* 4). He thus offers an alternative perspective on the patriarchal fetishization of female chastity. In some performances, Manikuntala Sen played the role of Prodhan's wife, and she suggests that the character was supposed to represent the legendary Mantagini Hazra, a Gandhian activist who was in her late seventies when she died in September 1942 leading a large procession as part of the Quit India movement. This association is overlooked by critical commentaries on the play, but if it was apparent to the audiences, then the old woman is not simply a maternal figure exhorting men to act, but herself a political activist. Manikuntala writes she was tempted by the chance to play the role of this fellow-activist; she recalls with relish both Panchanani's outburst and what follows:

> At their silent, helpless refusal, the angry old lady cast a glance of hatred and walked away, the sound of her stick tapping on the ground floated in the air. In

> the next scene. She chooses death, leading a public procession holding a flag in her hands [. . .] the death of that old woman left a lasting impression. I really enjoyed acting that role, perhaps because I could identify with Matangini.
>
> (*Freedom* 115–16)

Despite this evocation of female political activism, however, the play does not feature female political consciousness. When, at the end of the play, the peasants come together to work for a new harvest (they unite across religious divides and the play vaguely suggests that their togetherness can shield them against the kind of exploitation they have just experienced), the women are not central to their discussions.

As we think about the place of women in these cultural performances, as well as in public organizing, I want to suggest that it mattered a great deal, in symbolic as well as organizational terms, that the bodies on stage were often those of recognizable political actors. Manikuntala was proud that

> most of those female artists who had stepped onto the stage for the first time and those who became famous were activists of the women's movement. They themselves had witnessed the tragedy, which is why they were able to depict it so movingly.
>
> (115)

Tripti Mitra, who played the female lead in *Nabanna,* had also worked in the relief committees and those experiences haunted her. Once a woman had died in her arms; another time, she witnessed a hungry mother snatch a bowl of gruel from her own children. As Bishnupriya Dutt and Urmimala Sarkar Munsi write, 'Moved by numerous such incidents [Mitra] would come home from relief work with a lost appetite, still smelling the horrible smell, which emanated from them who had lost the motivation to bathe and take minimum care of themselves.' While acting in *Nabanna,* 'after a scene, she would come backstage and allow the reality to take over and then the tears would not stop' (89–90). When *Nabanna* was performed in villages, those directly affected by the famine came to watch. Sova Sen, another actress, recalls a performance in Burdawan, which thousands of peasants walked for miles to attend. Mid-performance, it began to pour, but both performers and audience felt compelled to wait and continue when the rain stopped. At another time, a boy who had lost his sister in the famine 'came backstage because I, as Radhika, reminded him of his dead sister. He had also brought a modest medal to gift me' (quoted in Dutt and Munsi).

Thus IPTA performances reached the kinds of people they represented on stage, including, in the case of *Nabanna,* poor peasants.[16] In Andhra, which faced acute food shortages of its own, IPTA staged a play called *Pratima* 'in 159 centres with an aggregate attendance of 2,50,000' (Pradhan 276).[17] Kondapalli Koteswaramma, the Telangana activist, collected huge sums of money from urban audiences in Andhra while singing about the famine and acting in a play which narrated the story of a Bengali village girl who ends up becoming a prostitute (29). Even when the audiences were more elite, however, the effect could be startlingly new. In a performance in Punjab, theatre

director Balwant Gargi recalled, actors emerged from among the audience, dressed in tattered clothes begging for food. They mounted the stage and began to sing.

> Their movements, gestures, expressions and speech had no theatricality; it was as real as the street scenes we experience daily. These faces were familiar to us in the poor quarters of Lahore. [. . .] Women in the audience sobbed; the eyes of the men misted; two college girls who had wrinkled their noses at the players, now wiped their tears. [. . .] People and players, the two halves of the theatre, kept apart for so long, joined and became one whole.
>
> (Bhatia, 'Staging Resistance' 443)[18]

IPTA productions showcased protagonists who had been entirely elided on the bourgeois stage, and involved a range of people who would otherwise not be associated with the stage. They also affirmed a different vision of the future, even if clumsily or programmatically. As film-maker K. A. Abbas observed of *Nabanna*:

> All the hopelessness, the helplessness, the tragic inertia, the degrading, dehumanising process of begging for food, scrounging for scraps, of desperately, selfishly fighting for leftovers like dogs – all that was there, etched in dramatic black and white. But the very fact that it was there – on the stage – that artistes with a sensitive social conscience had portrayed the tragedy of their people, had in it not only emotional catharsis of the Greek tragedy, but the glimmer of hope for the future. It was more than a play; it was the reaffirmation of human values on behalf of the people of Bengal, the people of India.
>
> (*Island* 266–67)

Still, there has been widespread criticism that *Nabanna*, and IPTA in general, were middle-class representations of the poor, and did not live up to IPTA's slogan 'People's Theatre Stars the People' (Bannerji, *Class* 48).

It is true that in some places such as Bengal and Bombay, both IPTA and the Party's Cultural Squad were largely composed of middle-class folk. Indeed, the very idea of a 'people's theatre', both in India and in the West, was inspired by Romain Rolland's manifesto, *The People's Theatre* (1903), which suggested that the intelligentsia needed to pave the way for the working class to create a new culture (de Mel 147). IPTA was formed with the aim of 'organizing a people's theatre movement throughout the whole of India as the means of revitalizing the stage and the traditional arts and making them at once the expression and organizer of our people's struggle for freedom, cultural progress and economic justice' (Pradhan 131).[19] The IPTA frankly believed its task was to represent people's struggles as well as to 'enlighten them about their rights and the nature and solution of the problems facing them' (Pradhan 151; de Mel 147). We can debate at length whether or not such efforts can ever facilitate the emergence of 'real' proletarian art, and indeed what such an art would look like.[20] But IPTA productions began a dialogue with folk forms and styles of performance, and the results did not simply feature a 'middle-class' and romantic idea of the people.[21] *Nabanna* was

revolutionary both in making the poor its central subject and incorporating elements of episodic performance from the *jatra*, Bengal's theatrical folk form, while departing from many of the form's traditional elements such as its long playing time.

In other parts of India, IPTA also engaged with local art forms, sometimes to a much greater extent. In Andhra Pradesh, traditional *burrakathas* or bardic recitals were infused with revolutionary content (375 such shows were held in 1944 alone; see Plate 17). In Punjab, Sheila Bhatia wrote a ballad in the style of the *heer* about a young Bengali girl whose family has been destroyed by the famine.[22] Such performances were often raw experiments with new languages and new forms; even in their rawness they inaugurated innovative modes of performance that remained influential in Indian theatre, dance and music. In Bombay, where there was already a rich tradition of urban performance, communist singers and balladeers came from among the working classes and ordinary folk, and they adapted existing forms, especially the very popular *tamasha*. Girangaon, where the cotton mills were situated, and which became a communist bastion from the 1930s on, became the hub of new forms of drama and music. Working-class performers like Amar Sheikh, who started life as a cleaner on buses, and Annabhau Sathe, who once defied Ushabai Dange to cross the picket lines because he desperately needed a job, became living legends and attracted huge audiences (Menon and Adarkar 132–33). They were not part of the Party's Central Squad, but they performed with the Maharashtra squad as well as created their own groups. There was no absolute divide between the two or between the latter and the middle-class artistes of the Bombay IPTA, and the performances of one influenced the other.[23]

IPTA and communist workers directly challenged conservative understandings of culture. For example, in Delhi, during the famine days, they heard that a Mahayagna was to be held. Tons of firewood would be used to make a hundred *kunds*, thousands of maunds of rice, wheat, ghee, and sugar were to feed these holly fires for ten days, and 50,000 people would be fed on the last day. Sarla Gupta (later Sharma) reported in the Party newspaper that the Food Member of the Central Government, whose job it was to prevent wastage of food, approvingly said that

> it was a solemn effort on the part of Hindus to invoke religion in the aid of the afflicted world. [. . .] All the foreign correspondents were in Delhi, and it was easy to inform the world through them that the problem in India was not political, but religious.
>
> (Gupta 1)

In response, the CPI organized a 'Save People's Food Day' and held 30 mass meetings, arguing that while every religious group had the right to practise its rites and ceremonies, communists could not condone 'the anti-social act of burning huge quantities of food and fuel [. . .] when millions were suffering'. During the *yagna*, 50 comrades entered the yagna grounds, 'singing songs, making speeches, calling upon people to aid *bhooka* Bengal'. Apart from collecting money from the attendees, they managed to make the yagna committee cut down on the food it burnt, and send

25,000 rupees to Bengal (Gupta 1). In later years, Sarla recalled (in an interview) the ways in which theatre, beyond this particular event, was key to her activities as a young Party worker in Delhi.

As is perhaps evident from the discussion so far, a great many of the communist performers active during the famine days were women. Communist students sent relief squads to Bengal. Vimla Dang came with one such squad from Punjab to Rangpur district, from where Benoy Roy, the leader of the Bengal cultural troupe hailed. She was devastated by the sight of starvation, especially

> little babies with bodies covered with sores. But she pulled herself together immediately as someone told her, 'This is no time for frustration and demoralisation. You have come here as young ambassadors on an important mission. Go back to your provinces and tell your people and your brethren the sad plight into which Bengal has been plunged today.' At many places [she] sang the song of the Bengal famine, '*Suno Hind ke rehnewalon, suno, suno . . .*' [Listen, all you who live in Hind, listen, listen].
>
> (29–30)

When Vimla sang this Hindi song in famine-wracked villages in Bengal it was only as a gesture of empathy. But back in Lahore, she plunged into the 'Aid Bengal' drive launched by the Students Federation. Such meetings raised money and carried political messages through new kinds of plays and music. Also, for the first time in India, political activists worked alongside professional performers. The dancer Shanti Bardhan and musician Abani Das Gupta, both part of Uday Shankar's experimental troupe in Almora, started to work on cultural performances for the Party after meeting P. C. Joshi. It was after the huge success of one of Bardhan's first performance pieces, *Bhooka Hai Bengal* (Bengal is Hungry, 1944), that the Party created a Central Cultural Squad which began to live and work together in the commune at Khusro Lodge in Andheri (see Plates 6, 7, and 14).

By far the most memorable and commented-on feature of *Bhooka Hai Bengal* was a 'Dance of Hunger' (also referred to as Starvation Dance). It used to be performed by three dancers, including Usha Dutta, a young Party whole-timer who had lived in a Calcutta Commune. Film-maker Homi Sethna remembered it as featuring a dancer

> painted with white fluorescent paint on a black tight-fitting costume which was not visible to the audience. It was accompanied by the shrill and piercing singing of Priti Sarkar, 'Bhookha Hai Bengal, Bhukha [*sic*] Hai Bengal, Bapu, Bhookha Hai Bengal' [. . .] the show left [theatre artist Sultan] Padamsi and me speechless and sobbing from within. The well-fed Bombay audience just gaped and wondered, dumb-struck by this phenomenon that had hit Bombay like a tornado.
>
> (81)[24]

The dance was hugely popular among more plebeian audiences as well. Usha Dutta writes,

> Sometimes we would put up three shows a day. We had few musical instruments. If a particular bus in which we were traveling happened to break down, we would carry all those instruments on our shoulders and walk two to three miles to the next village to put up our show.
>
> (18)

At the All India Peasants' Conference in Vijaywada,

> There were nearly a lakh [hundred thousand] and a half people there – they stretched out like a sea. I had never seen so many people together in my life. I nearly lost my nerve seeing so many people. After Panu Pal [an IPTA writer and her co-dancer] finished dancing, the congregation was requested to contribute to help the famine victims of Bengal. The appeal was spontaneously met with a shower of jewellery and coins that rained down on the podium. People were shoving one another aside in their enthusiasm to give money. Soon it became impossible to conduct the meeting. The leaders appealed to the people to submit their donations later. Never again have I felt the way I did that day. I later heard that people remembered and discussed my performance years later.
>
> (18–19)

The IPTA report confirms this account, and in fact emphasizes that it was Usha's performance which moved the audience to tears (Pradhan 253).

Usha's enormous passion for dancing was not always accommodated within the Party. It was only after 'a great deal of weeping' that she got permission to join the cultural squad in Bengal (see Plate 10). Still, many leaders had a soft spot for her because she had run away from home as a very young girl to join the Party. After the success of *Bhooka Hai Bengal*, Usha became part of the community of performers at the Andheri Commune where Bardhan, along with singers such as Benoy Roy and other gifted performers (including, for a while, sitar maestro Ravi Shankar) continued to create ballets, dance-dramas and other performance pieces such as 'Spirit of India' and 'India Immortal'.

Without previous training, Usha remembers, most of the dancers 'had to exercise from 10 to 12 hours to loosen up our arms and legs. This was a real golden chapter in my life. As in other places, I felt that dancing in front of ten to twelve thousand workers of the Girni Kamgar Union and getting their applause was the real measure of the artiste's skill and the stuff of her joy' (20). For Usha's friend and co-dancer Rekha Jain, beginning to dance in front of large audiences like this was a far more terrifying experience. She had come from a conservative family

> in which even stirring out of the house unveiled was prohibited. The face was, of course veiled, but even the tonga (horse-carriage) was so covered on every side as to make our limbs invisible. I knew what a shameful thing it was for such a girl to seek to learn dance. This is why I felt extremely shy and diffident. My mind was guilt-ridden.
>
> (Jain 61)

When she returned to her husband's family in 1947 'her mother-in-law did not permit Rekha to touch her feet because she had committed the crime of dancing; she would not permit Rekha to enter the kitchen for a long time' (Verma 69). But living in the Andheri Commune, and practicing all day, as well as listening to Shanti Bardhan and Ravi Shankar's stories about their own rigorous training, Rekha 'came to look upon dance as a great art rather than a questionable thing held in contempt by conventional society' (Jain 65). Still, when Bardhan roundly scolded her during a rehearsal, she crept into her own room to cry uncontrollably, until he came to pacify her and did so with so much kindness that 'I bent down automatically to touch his feet. [. . .] After that event, I was really immersed in my lessons. They were woven into the very fabric of my daily routine' (65).

Conventions of discipleship – the Indian 'guru-shishya parampara' – combined with the family-like structure of the commune to create a paternal – filial relationship between the teacher and the student, even in a troupe that was striving to upturn social and artistic conventions. All the directors, trainers, composers, and choreographers in the IPTA and the Party's Cultural Squad were men; however, autobiographical accounts by IPTA women affirm that they felt part of 'a unified community of equals [. . . in which] new formulations of social relations were imagined and practiced' (Purkayastha 104). Two recent commentators suggest that the IPTA movement 'placed itself in the position of a facilitator for the process of lessening the divide between genders' (Dutt and Munsi 230). But such camaraderie was disrupted by other tensions and quarrels resulting from personality clashes as well as from ideological differences. After a performance in Calcutta, Usha

> was informed that I would be sent back to Bombay again. I felt the earth give way under my feet. What was the reason for this directive? I was informed that I was no good at dancing. This was probably the biggest blow I ever got in my life. I loved dancing infinitely. I had raised thousands of rupees by dancing in Punjab; the crowds in Vijaywada had rushed to donate money after my dance. Actually, some members of the squad had conspired to throw me out. I did not mince my words and had never tried to please anyone. Even Benoy Roy whom I nearly worshipped like a god used to cower before Shanti Bardhan's fulminations. What could he do! Comrade Joshi's writ ran thus: squad members must learn at the feet of professional artistes who did not belong to the party. Actually, the problem had nothing to do with my dancing. No one had ever pointed to flaws in my dancing during rehearsals or at recitals. But I protested against any undemocratic practice. It was possibly for this reason that I was removed through lies and a defamation campaign! Well, let that pass. Of course, the squad broke up after a year and a half.
>
> (20–21)

While Usha suggests that 'professionals' like Shanti Bardhan looked down upon Party members like herself, the non-Party performers sometimes felt that Party leaders, who came from a higher social background, looked down upon them.[25] There were

other problems – the professionals were irked by the Party's interference in their work and decisions. Indeed, the cracks showed during the staging of *Nabanna*; the IPTA report on the play commented that the production was too expensive to generate optimum money for the relief funds: 'More attention was centred on technical perfection, skill etc., and as a result, the popular aspect, popular demand, and people's living contact [*sic*] came to be counted less important' (Pradhan 257–58). Ultimately, IPTA was to see internal battles and debates on whether professional skill or ideological commitment were more important for a performer.[26] Nevertheless, when the central squad was disbanded, Preeti Banerjee says, 'We were dumb-founded. Narendra Sharma wept profusely requesting Joshi to reconsider the decision. But he politely declined with his arguments. We had to accept it but many of us were not convinced' (Ray, 3).

Usha's own recollections show an increasing sense of disaffection from the Party at this stage. She writes that she 'wandered around Calcutta like a mad person. I just could not get any peace' (21). She decided she wanted to go to Manipur to learn dance, but 'knew the party would never give its permission if I blandly stated that I wanted to go to Manipur. I told them that I wished to do party work in Assam' (21). Because 'the slander "you are unfit to dance" kept coming back [. . .] I remained adamant about my pledge to learn the Manipuri dance' (21). While she was learning, Usha received a telegram that the director Khwaja Ahmad Abbas wanted her to come to Bombay to act in *Dharti ke Lal*, a film being produced by the Indian People's Theatre Association: 'I was utterly elated by this summons: my mind and life's breath leapt up to dance in the same instant' (22). The IPTA report for this period comments that Usha

> had to leave the troupe as her health prevented her from continuing her training in dancing. She was working in Assam for some months but she came back to Bombay to take part on the film 'Children of the Earth.'
>
> (Pradhan 247)

But when shooting ended, Usha just as eagerly rushed to Chittagong to campaign for Kalpana Joshi, who was standing for elections: 'That was it! I just had to go to Chittagong to work for her. I never got to see more than a scene of two from the film that I had worked in for a while – nor did I take full payment' (*Dinguli More* 22). For the moment, Usha's passion to work in a comrade's election campaign was at least as powerful as her desire to be a performer.

These two spheres were not easy to reconcile, but women performer-activists attempted to do just that. Communist women creatively used existing women-centric music and dance folk traditions (the *gidda* in Punjab, *garba* in Gujarat, or *lavani* in Maharashtra) to reach women, while also changing the significance of existing cultural traditions. For example,

> there was a wide-spread custom in rural Punjab where all the women in a village would gather in front of a house where a boy child is born and perform a

> 'Gidda' dance to celebrate the event. Members of the Lok Istri Sabha changed this custom by celebrating the birth of a girl child in the same way.
>
> (quoted in Dutt and Munsi 12)

But as time went on, neither regional groups like MARS, nor the pan-Indian National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW), took cultural innovation or performance very seriously. This was not surprising, for after P. C. Joshi was summarily removed from the leadership of the Party and expelled, the Party did not pay any systematic attention to questions of culture, and that sphere began to be seen as subsidiary to politics proper.

This was spelt out most comprehensively by the brilliant film director Ritwik Ghatak, who was a member of the CPI. In *On the Cultural 'Front',* an important document which he submitted to the Party's Central Committee in 1954, Ghatak writes that there is a 'curious phenomenon' in the country – many artists are 'taking up the cause of the people' but 'no Communist artist is working among them' (15). This is, he wrote,

> monstrous when we think of our current smug complacency. We are hurrying and bustling and talking and running and all the while we are actually sitting on the movement. We the Communist artistes.
>
> Not a single art-work of high value has come from us in the last four years. We are reviving our past work, rehashing it and giving it a new name, or else creating Amateur, third-rate work. And all the while, we remain 'talkers-in-chief'.
>
> (15)

Ghatak does not mince his words. In very clear and hard-hitting prose he points out that the Party has begun to think of culture in functional terms – as a money-making machine, or as useful in mobilizing people for meetings. At the same time, the people actually involved in the production of art are sidelined. There is thus a gulf between 'the Party and the culture workers' (18). Party leaders, he suggests, need to understand that the only people who can mobilize artists and cultural workers are artists themselves. They cannot expect artists to be organized by Party functionaries who are not themselves practitioners: 'There is no such occupation as Art-organizer; it is a monstrous tautology [. . .] the nature of the task indicates that only artists can handle the job' (25). Engaging with Lenin's understanding of the development of communist art and culture, he argues that the Party needs to rethink the very purpose of communist artists. It should encourage and nurture serious and sophisticated pursuit of different branches of art and culture, rather than thinking of artists as simply mass mobilisers:

> We have not set out to physically mobilize the masses. We support special people who are bound to us by the common love of cultural pursuit, which is an activity of men who are scattered all over the strata of the masses.
>
> (34)

Ghatak is clear where the problem lies. While many comrades suggest that what the Party needs a is a new 'line' on culture, and wish for the return of 'Joshi's Golden Period,' he, on the contrary, states simply that 'we are not seeking a Golden Period, but a proper place in the body of the Party, and our share in Party rights and responsibilities' (19). The Party leaders have no time at all for cultural workers so that the 'Main shortcoming in our work today is because of *lack of Party attention*' (96). He ends by critiquing the Party's past understandings of the situation in India:

> Drop the idea that Revolution is around the corner. It is not. Forget about that former previous 'elation', former 'enthusiasm', and that romantic feeling of Revolutionary 'zeal' – in a word, all that guided us up to at least 1950.
>
> (99)

But, on the other hand, he writes, the demoralization that set in afterwards is also not justified because 'Things are on the move today' (99).

Ghatak was expelled from the Party. From the 1950s onward, to be a woman and prioritize culture was to risk a double marginalization within the communist movement. Therefore, over time, fewer women whole-timers or organizers of the Party ventured into cultural work, even those who, in memoirs or interviews, celebrate their earlier participation in musical, theatrical and dance performances.

*

The Bengal famine generated a great deal of communist literature as well; conversely this literature helped bring awareness about the famine nationally.[27] *Dharti Ke Lal*, the film in which Usha Dutta acted, was inspired by *Nabanna* and Krishan Chandar's Urdu novella *Anna Data* (literally 'Giver of Grain'). Like *Nabanna*, *Anna Data* had garnered instant popularity as it conveyed the enormity of the famine to readers outside Bengal; Ismat Chugtai recalled that it was Chandar's book that made her aware of its horrific nature. *Anna Data* was translated almost immediately into English (as *I Cannot Die*) by K. A. Abbas, who went on to direct *Dharti Ke Lal*. In his preface, K. A. Abbas wrote that it was recognized as 'the most powerful and poignant story written about the Bengal famine in any language' ('Introducing the Author' 4).[28] For ordinary readers, as Abbas pointed out, what stood out was that Chandar made the 'greatest tragedy of their times so vivid, so *real*, so *personal* to them,' at once capturing 'the destitution of a whole people' and 'personalizing the misery of the mass' (4–5). Like much other famine literature, the novella featured a starving mother and baby, and was concerned with fallen womanhood, but it offered a twist on the usual narrative.

The novella was composed of three separate but delicately connected stories. The first, 'The Man with A Thorn in his Conscience', takes the form of a series of letters sent from Calcutta by Ulluson, a foreign consul from the 'Republic of Silorica' to the head of his country's government. It offers a sarcastic and occasionally heavy-handed expose of the denial of the existence of famine by the diplomatic community and the Indian authorities. Ulluson reports that whereas there is severe wartime rationing in

Europe, diplomats, government functionaries and the wealthy in India consume lavishly. Diplomats who have been in India for long have informed him that Indians produce plenty of grain – if they can't get enough to eat, it's because they also produce too many babies. When deaths are reported, Ulluson follows the governmental claims that they are cases of *rachitis* (rickets). One day, he finds a dead child trying to suckle its dead mother on the steps of his consulate. The hospital refuses to take the child, so Ulluson places it with the other dead bodies that now litter the steps of his consulate: 'I telephoned the police to arrange to remove them at once. . .' (Chandar 12). His maid has assured him that the Bengali press is lying in reporting that there is indeed a famine; indeed the Bengal Assembly has insisted that there is none and therefore also no need of rationing. Meanwhile, Ulluson buys a doll for his sister for 6 rupees; shortly after, he is badgered by a woman trying to sell her child for a rupee and a half. The diplomat calculates that the going rate for human lives is cheaper in India than what was paid for Africans during the slave trade. Now, his chauffeur informs him that

> Sonagachi (the red-light area) is a regular slave-market. Hundreds of girls are being bought and sold every day. Parents sell them and prostitutes buy them. The usual price is a rupee and a quarter. But if the girl is good looking she might fetch four or five or even ten rupees. Rice costs about a rupee per pound. So if a family can sell two of its girls, it has enough rice for a week or two. And the average Bengali family has more than two girls.
>
> (16–17)

A few days later the Mayor of Calcutta appeals for help, and Ulluson's response is based on principle:

> I assured him of our sympathy but also made it clear that this famine is an internal problem of India and that our government does not wish to interfere in the affairs of another people. We are true democrats.
>
> (17)

The second story, 'The Man Who is Dead', turns to the self-absorption of the Indian upper classes. One morning a wealthy Indian man about town opens his morning paper to graphic and upsetting pictures of starving men and women who 'who seemed to be dying everywhere'. Although mainly preoccupied by memories of Snehlata, the shallow but gorgeous woman with whom he had danced at a Mayoral ball the previous night, the man visualizes helping his starving compatriots, and thus gaining wild fame: 'Meetings! Processions! Volunteers! Donations! [. . .] Suddenly he saw his name in flashing headlines. Every newspaper was acknowledging his patriotic services!' (27). However, Snehlata persuades him that organizing a dance for famine relief would be better than going to famine-struck areas where there would not be any good hotels. On the way to the ball, she is horrified by a pair of starving children who tug at her sari begging for money, whereupon the man slaps the boy and

pulls the girl away by her hair. After their car pulls away, the boy affectionately asks his sobbing sister if she has been hurt. At the ball both Snehlata and the man are exhausted from 'dancing and drinking, drinking and dancing' but allow that they have 'suffer for one's country'; Snehlata announces, 'How I hate imperialism!' The story ends with the man snuggling in Snehlata's arms on the dance floor: 'He was drowned. He was asleep. He was dead!' (35).

The humanity of the poor is complicated in the last story, 'The Man Who is Alive'. It is narrated in the voice of a dead musician, who had collapsed on the steps of Ulluson's consulate, and now recounts his tale to passers-by who recoil from the sight of him and other corpses. Three years ago, he had encountered a lovely and lively young girl on the banks of a river in the village; she appeared to him like a 'nymph' from the sea, but was the daughter of a local fisherman. The two married and had a daughter before the famine struck. Slowly starving, they joined the 'army of ants [. . .] all headed for Calcutta. To Calcutta! To Calcutta!!' There, without help, each one was 'reduced to the most elemental, brutal, desperate necessity of self-preservation . . .' (43). With great economy that is akin to Chittaprosad's spare strokes of the brush, Chandar paints a picture of hunger distorting all human bonds:

> Husbands were selling their wives, mothers were selling their daughters, brothers were selling their sisters. These were the people who, before they had been reduced to destitution, would have killed these pimps and brothel-keepers for even daring to suggest any such transaction. But today they were not only selling their women-folk, they were extolling their 'goods' like vulgar shopkeepers, flattering the buyers, haggling and quarrelling for a single pice. Religion, morality, spiritualism, motherhood – the strongest ideals and emotions of humanity had been stripped off. And life stood naked in its elemental state – hungry, blood-thirsty, cruel and ferocious like a wild beast in the jungle!
>
> My wife said, 'Let us also sell our daughter!'
>
> (45)

Shocked, the husband snatches their daughter from his wife's arms, but the latter is beyond registering his anger, and continues to follow him 'mechanically, blindly'. The husband tries to summon up the beautiful girl he had married, to understand why 'this majesty of motherhood' was now

> like a trampled, disfigured corpse. [. . .] If it is true that Woman is a miracle, a faith, that she is the essence and the truth of life, then I say that this faith, this truth, this miracle is born of a grain of rice and without that it dies!
>
> (46)

Feminist critics have often noted how horrors that are almost beyond representation are 'characterized as female; again and again, images of women are used to figure

moments of breakdown or crisis – in the social body, in political authority, or in representation itself' (Kelleher 6). In the case of Bengal, the counterpart to a good mother who suffers because she is unable to feed her children is the figure of an 'unnatural' mother, a woman who abandons her children and family (Kelleher 171, 190–95; Roy 394, 400–1). Her departure from the norm signals social decay. The young mother in *Anna Data* is such a figure, but through her, the novella suggests that *all* mothers – indeed all humans – can be rendered unnatural by hunger. But what remains disturbing about the story is that the father suffers no such distortion, faithfully tending his daughter until she dies, and bequeaths him her favourite toy, a small wooden rattle that he himself clutches in death. The enormity of the devastation is measured by the metamorphosis of the nymph-mother into an unfeeling corpse. The father however, continues, even as corpse, to be more humane and more *alive* than those around him. Kelleher suggests that the suffering of men is rarely at the centre of narratives of the Bengal famine; 'instead, much of the detail [. . .] concerns the various survival strategies employed by women during famine, their occasional success and their dreadful failure' (171). In both *Nabanna* and *Anna Data*, however, men remain the experiencing subjects, and it is through their anguish or resilience that the enormity of the famine is communicated.

This is not quite the case with K. A. Abbas's film *Dharti ke Lal* (1946), which was based on both these texts. Produced by IPTA, it was the first film in India to be made by a non-commercial group, and one of the earliest examples of quasi-documentary realism in Indian cinema (Banerjee and Srivastava 74–75). It opens with IPTA's slogan 'The People's Theatre Stars the People' blazed against a backdrop of masses of people walking across the screen. Like *Nabanna*, the characters it featured may not have been the 'masses' as such, but the film brought together a host of communist or progressive men and women, including film star Balraj Sahni in his first major role, actress Zohra Sehgal (who was part of Uday Shankar's troupe and sister to the communist organizer Hajra Begum), Shambhu Mitra (who had acted in *Nabanna* and was associate director of the film), his wife Tripti (who had also starred in *Nabanna)*, Ravi Shankar as music composer, noted poets Ali Sardar Jafri and Prem Dhawan as lyricists, and Shanti Bardhan, creator of *Bhooka Bengal,* as dance director. A version of the famous IPTA song 'Bhooka Hai Bengal' was featured in the film. The actors also included Party activists such as Usha Dutt, and members of communist organizations such as the Dhulia District Kisan Sabha, the Bombay Students' Federation, and the Navjavan Mazdoor Party.

Like *Nabanna*, the film charts the story of a single peasant family – a patriarch, his wife, two sons, and their wives – through the famine. It includes their experiences in Calcutta, and their return to the village with an awareness of the need for them to form a collective in order to combat their exploiters. Like *Anna Data*, it juxtaposes their suffering with the conspicuous consumption and indifference of the wealthy. Unlike in *Nabanna* though, the peasant grandmother, played by the very young Usha Dutta, is no instigator of protest. Far from calling upon men to save women's honour, she becomes the embodiment of unnatural womanhood. Her younger son's wife, Radhika, prostitutes herself to buy milk for her starving child; when the other daughter-in-law tries to cover up for Radhika, saying that she got the milk from a gentleman, the grandmother taunts both,

> Of course, you are young, so you manage to get things! No one gives *us* even a dry crumb! [. . .] I've forgotten how milk tastes [. . .] don't give him so much milk. He'll vomit. [. . .] And snatching the bottle, she guzzles the milk, prompting her husband's outburst: 'Bitch!'

The film offers a far more nuanced reading of both female subjectivity and the familial and social place of women than either the play or the novella it draws upon. Neither of the daughters-in-law fit in seamlessly within the family, even before the famine starts. Binodini, the elder one, is childless and therefore always tense about the expectations of her parents-in-law that she produce a grandson. Radhika has more modern sensibilities – she wants to read and write, and insists on learning despite the scandal this creates in the village. She and her husband Ramu, separated in Calcutta, find each other to discover that each has had to severely compromise in order to survive in the city – if Radhika has prostituted herself, Ramu has also turned pimp. They have been separated from the rest of the family, which returns to the village, with the elder daughter-in-law caring for Radhika and Ramu's little baby. There, the entire community embarks on 'collaborative farming'. The idea is only hinted at in *Nabanna*, but in the film there is discussion among the peasants of how this will enable them to escape future exploitation by money-lenders:

> That means, we all plough the fields together, sow the seeds, water them, harvest all together?
>
> Yes, whatever we have, plough, oxen, it'll be useful to everyone!
>
> Once the harvest is ready, it'll be distributed evenly!
>
> [. . .] So we must choose: between collaborative farming or fate, hunger, and death.

Ramu, too is excited by the new possibilities: 'The farmers of Ameenpur have started farming collectively! It's a new beginning! Let's go back!' But Radhika knows that as someone who has sold her body, she cannot fit into this community. Even if it has adopted a new attitude to farming, it has not changed its attitudes to women: 'You go back! I'm not worthy enough to return!' Ramu persuades her otherwise: 'Don't say that Radhika! Think about it! Times are changing!' However, when they reach the village, they see a collectivity that appears both happy and complete; it is clear to both that there is no need or place for them within it. Their child is being cared for by Binodini, and no one seems to miss them. As they turn away, Radhika observes that 'they've forgotten us! It's better that the villagers forget us!' Ramu's rejoinder is both formulaic and inchoate in placing the two of them as inspiration for those fighting against imperialism and for socialism:

> That's not true! The people of our village, the people of our country can never forget us! If it's not for us, what about all those who lost their homes, lives,

> honour and dignity! Until our country is freed from slavery and hunger, our memory shall prevail like a flame in their hearts.

Even as it seems clear that this reformed collectivity cannot yet accept sexual deviants, Ramu's speech suggests that their absence will continue to serve as a reminder of battles that are yet to be fought. Thus, unlike *Nabanna* and *Anna Data*, in which women are either chaste or demonized, *Dharti Ke Lal* retains sympathy for Radhika, even as it marks the impossibility of her reintegration with the larger family. Her husband does not revile her, and their companionship is now based on a mutual acceptance of the other's 'transgressions', or the price they have paid for survival.

*

It is only when we turn to Sulekha Sanyal's novel *Nabankur* (The Seedling, 1956), a novel written by a young communist woman 12 years after *Nabanna* was staged, that we get a different kind of engagement with famine and a radically divergent view of gender. Properly speaking, *Nabankur* is not a famine novel at all. Rather, it is a novel by a communist and a feminist about a woman's political consciousness at home and in the world. But its protagonist (like Sanyal herself), attained that consciousness by engaging with politics and communism during the famine. Moreover, the title of Sanyal's book suggests a dialogue with the earlier text – new rice or 'nabanna' can only be grown if this single female 'seedling' is allowed to thrive. It thus places women's agency and personal growth as central to progressive politics. If *Nabanna* dealt with an impoverished peasant family, *Nabankur* features an extended feudal clan which includes both the oppressors of peasants and communist activists who organize the peasants. If in *Nabanna* an old woman dies exhorting a collectivity to stand up for their rights and for female honour, in *Nabankur* a young girl comes to political consciousness by fighting for her rights. Indeed, the novel suggests that women can only achieve the right to education, to love, and to political participation by asserting themselves against great odds. Thus *Nabankur* subtly rewrites the understanding of gender in other famine narratives, including those created by other communists. It decentres the famine in order to foreground the emergence of a female political subject, offering a far more optimistic vision of the future.

Sulekha Sanyal was an active member of the Communist Party, and had been briefly imprisoned for her activities; *Nabankur* was written when she was 26, while her marriage was breaking up. The novel has obviously autobiographical elements – Sanyal had grown up in a landowning family in Korkandi (a village in present-day Bangladesh) and Chhobi, its central character, is a fiercely non-conformist girl in a conservative, and slowly disintegrating, feudal clan. Sanyal was politicized by her brother and his friends who were involved in militant nationalist groups. Chhobi imbibes her political lessons from her uncle Adhir (Adhirka to her) who is arrested for his revolutionary activities, sent to prison in the Andamans, and returns a communist.[29] (Indeed, through Adhir, Sanyal also comments on the history of revolutionary politics, and traces its connections as well as differences with communism.) Chhobi moves away from the village to live with an aunt in Chittagong and

be schooled there, as Sanyal herself had done. Unlike the other communist writings on the famine, *Nabankur* does not highlight starvation and female loss of honour. Instead it dwells on Chhobi's childhood and youth to provide an extended meditation on female lives crippled by patriarchy and poverty. Sanyal uses her own urban and rural experiences to create a female *bildungsroman*, interweaving Chhobi's constant struggle against gender inequalities within the family with her growing political consciousness, both of which reach a crisis point during the famine.

Of course, these two strands, the domestic and the public, are to be found in all accounts – fictional or historical – of women's political participation in India. Politically active women were for the most part born into progressive families which were already committed to women's education and (to varying degrees) their equality with men, or they married men who held such views. Otherwise, they had to rebel against their families, as is the case in many of the real-life stories I have recounted in this book. *Nabankur* attests to the formative role of mothers in enabling their daughters to rebel in ways that they themselves did not fully understand or endorse.

Chhobi is a wild young thing, refusing to sit still or learn domestic skills; when the young boys of the village crowd around Adhirka to hear him talk 'about the country and its glorious future', she comes in uninvited; it is she who can answer the questions he directs at the boys, and she who insists on participating in the physical training he gives them (Sanyal 12). When Adhirka is arrested, she doesn't collapse into tears like her elder brother; unlike him, she has a canny sense of what to do and say to the police who come to search and question the household. It is painfully difficult for Chhobi's mother, Mamata, to raise her strong, unruly and argumentative daughter according to the protocols of the family, which will not even let her love and feed Chhobi openly. Her parents-in-law, Chhobi's paternal grandparents, are constantly appalled by this 'shameless tomboy prancing around' who, they are sure, 'will bring shame to this family one day' (19). The grandmother always gives Chhobi less to eat than her brother and male cousins, and when all the children get into trouble, Chhobi is the one held responsible.

Chhobi's defiance stems from the fact that, that unlike the boys, she notices and is angry about the injustices of the clan towards the poor peasants on their land. Chhobi (whose name means 'picture') is her mother's darling. Mamata muses that she 'really is the picture of me as I was once' (62) but, at the same time, she is frustrated and puzzled by her daughter. As a daughter-in-law of a conservative household, Mamata has very little power to intervene when Chhobi is picked on by her grandparents. Often, she expresses her frustrations by punishing Chhobi herself, and then collapsing in tears:

> Mamata struck Chhobi's back hard with the ladle a couple of times and said in a tense but low voice, 'You good-for-nothing girl! Why do I have listen to criticism from other people on your account all the time? I can't take it anymore.' Her anger flared up even more as her eyes fell on Kulada [Chhobi's father]. 'Why put your cane down? Give her a thrashing. It'll please those people [her parents-in-law] and me too!' Her voice was choked, her eyes

> brimmed with tears. She dragged Chhobi across the courtyard to the other side of the house, muttering all the while to herself, 'It's not as if I have dozens of daughters. Only this one, yet I can't feed her properly, nor give her decent clothes. [. . .] My only fault is I don't lock her up in the house and teach her things way beyond her age! All right, so be it. From today I won't let her out!' (21)

Alone with her daughter, Mamata pulls her close: 'Why do you make me lose my temper so? All the other girls stay at home and help with the housework, and you run around all day; of course people will talk' (22). After another such incident, Chhobi wakes up at night to find her mother caressing her and whispering, 'Chhobu, my darling! You are my only daughter! And yet they won't let me love you even a little bit. . .' (37).

Chhobi is acutely aware of how overworked her mother is: 'Chhobi didn't like it. Work, work, work all day long. Always in the kitchen, cooking and serving meals. What would happen if for once she didn't work so hard?' (23). There is no escape for Mamata, but she dreams of a different life for Chhobi, even as she recognizes the futility of such dreams. Mamata knows that the family will probably not let Chhobi stay in school for long, but she asks the local schoolmaster to keep an eye on her daughter anyway: 'Teach her all you can, and for as long as possible.' The old teacher is 'thrilled, not only by the extra money she gave him, but by the novelty of her ideas' (29). The modesty of Mamata's dreams for her daughter indicates the inescapability of early marriage for women in that milieu. The only woman not married early is Binti, an aunt of Chhobi's, who is dark and therefore considered ugly. The family cannot afford a dowry that would mitigate this 'handicap'; finally, an elderly widower with a 'brace of sons' is found for her. At the wedding Chhobi comes to the realization that 'marriage is not a good thing at all. [. . .] I don't want to see anymore' (53).

And indeed, in Chhobi's world, marriage is a compromise at best. Binti's prettier sister Sukumari, long married to a rich man in Chittagong, but still childless, arrives for the wedding, loaded with gifts, and sparkling with vivacity. But it turns out that her laughter is brittle – her husband has had a relationship with another woman for years, even though he is generous and polite to Sukumari. The situation is made worse by the fact that they don't have children. Sukumari shares her misery with Mamata, who in turn confesses her fears that Chhobi will soon be pulled out of school by the family. But she's shocked when Sukumari asks 'Will you give her to me, Boudi? [. . .] I won't return her to you until she completes at least one degree. You won't be able to have her here anytime you wish' (44–45). Both mother and daughter are miserable at the idea of separation, but ultimately, Mamata agrees, because it's the only chance for Chhobi to live a life unlike her own (62). Chhobi's departure parallels a young bride's tearful journey to her husband's home, even as it signals an alternative future. For Chhobi, as for a young bride, it's the parting from her mother that is unbearable: 'And what about Ma? [. . .] I don't want to be educated. I can't stay away from Ma' (58). On the steamer, she hears sobbing which sounds 'like an echo of her own weeping heart' (64). It is a young girl with red powder on her forehead marking

her married status: 'Why was she crying? Maybe because she missed her mother.' A dark man the same age as Chhobi's uncle accompanies the bride: 'he neither spoke to her nor tried to console the girl, instead he gaped stupidly at the people around him' (64).

Chhobi's is a slow and painful adjustment to the city. Her aunt and uncle's lives underline the hypocrisy of 'respectable' marriages. The uncle still visits his old flame, but when drunk, begs for entry to his wife's bed. When his lover, a nurse, begs off the relationship, he taunts her, for, in his eyes, no nurse can be chaste. Sukumari, the aunt, has no emotional anchor other than Chhobi, to whom she clings, and prevents from visiting her own mother. And indeed, as Chhobi guiltily but infrequently realizes, Mamata has all but faded from Chhobi's memory. Over the next four years, Chhobi learns much about poverty, religious differences, and sexual asymmetry in the city, as well as about the possibilities for women to work and participate in politics. At school, her best friend is Minu, a Christian girl, whose mother is a nurse who is bringing up her two children alone. She is the first working woman Chhobi has seen (66). At home, she befriends a series of exceedingly poor girls. First, she meets Nilu and Pilu, two young sisters who live in a 'miserable room reeking of poverty' near her aunt's house with their emaciated parents and brother (143). She sees how they 'stood aside to make way for the schoolgirls, with curiosity and fear in their eyes. It was as though they expected to be admonished if they failed to make way for them' (84). Nilu and Pilu salivate over Chhobi's mention of the food she will be fed by her aunt, and Chhobi finds she can't enjoy eating anymore. Chhobi's increasing recognition of how poverty traps the two sisters in an inescapable quagmire alienates her from the literary fantasies she consumes: 'Chhobi closed her books in disgust. Ugh! All these fairy tales – they were mere fantasies. [. . .] They never wrote about girls like Nilu! She wouldn't read such stories again!' (125).

Nilu and Pilu introduce Chhobi to Paribanu, a Muslim girl even poorer than the sisters, who lives in 'hovel leaning over a pond covered with green scum' (99). Paribanu works at a job she hates – massaging and manicuring a rich woman – so she can support her mother and go to school; contemplating Paribanu's life, Chhobi 'felt as though she was choking: it was dreadful that such a young child had to work' (103). Chhobi visits all three girls in their miserable homes; despite their poverty, both mothers insist on the protocols of hospitality by offering her their crumbs. On the contrary, her aunt is furious at her choice of friends; in her eyes, Chhobi bitterly reflects,

> Nilu was a thief, Minu a Christian, Paribanu and her mother were Muslims. They were not to be touched. You could not eat in their homes. If you touched another human being you lost your caste, then you had to have a bath. Pishima had made her take a bath even on the day she came back and told her that during their hygiene lesson the doctor had allowed them to touch the pair of human lungs he had brought in a jar of alcohol.
>
> (107)

Through these unsuitable friends, Chhobi witnesses the precariousness of poor lives. Nilu and Pilu's father dies and, soon after, Nilu vanishes. Neighbourhood gossip has it

that she has been taken away by a military contractor to service his men, but the novel implies that it is also possible that she has run away with a lover. The word is that she has eloped with Dinanath, a young man working in a hosiery factory with whom she was in love. The only way out for a nearly destitute woman is a man, and the best hope is that she has chosen the man herself. Chhobi wishes that neither is true, and hopes that 'No one had taken Nilu away, she hadn't gone with anyone. She had gone off all by herself, all alone' (144).

But Chhobi also glimpses alternative possibilities for women, mainly through Sudha, a favourite teacher who is deeply involved in anti-colonial politics. One day, Chhobi sees signs for a *hartal* or strike; Shobha, an older student, explains that it in support of the revolutionaries who have been exiled to the Andamans. The prisoners have gone on hunger strike because they want to be in a jail in the country rather than far away where they can be tortured in secret. (Historically, such strikes in support of the revolutionaries did galvanize young people across the nation.) Chhobi wonders whether her Adhirka is one of the prisoners; she knows that he too has been sentenced to jail for five years. The next day Chhobi goes to school anyway, because she wants to get a feel of the hartal, but upon seeing a cordon of strikers around the school, she runs back home instead of crossing it. In her political naiveté, she had not understood that going to school meant working against the strike. There are other lessons in store – the next day, she learns that Sudha has been sacked from the school, following a brief arrest. Like many of the female revolutionaries active in Bengal (discussed in Chapter 1), Sudha comes from a very poor family; Shobha says

> you have no idea how poor they are. Sudhadi has three or four younger brothers and sisters. Her father is a very old man [. . .] her elder brother has been exiled to the Andamans. Sudhadi was the only breadwinner. Who knows what's going to happen to them now.
>
> (134)

When Chhobi takes her questions to Sukumari, her aunt can only reply that everything is a matter of 'Fate'. Chhobi realizes that she already knows more than women like her aunt, who have been schooled to disengage from the world outside the home:

> It is not fate! [. . .] It's Amaladi (the school principal) who chose to drive her away. Sudhadi is not at fault. If anyone is to blame, it's the police. Look at Nilu's family – they are so poor, and you blame it on fate. [. . .]You don't know a thing, Pishima.
>
> (134)

Chhobi asks her uncle and aunt to appoint Sudha as her tutor. Without realizing it, she has managed to act against 'fate'.

The Second World War begins. Chhobi's political awareness is further sharpened by her proximity to Sudha, who is attracted to Subhas Chandra Bose's line that this

is the moment to strike against the British: 'Chhobi liked those words of Sudhadi's leader: "Give me blood; and I will give you freedom." Adhirka too used to say things like that' (139). But as the bombing intensifies, 'squadrons of planes filled the sky every day, military trucks roared down the roads and howling sirens' rent the air, life in the city becomes impossible. Chhobi's school cannot be kept open any more, and her mother asks that she be sent home. Chhobi is downcast because had she stayed on; she could have taken her Matric exams; she feels 'that she had never done anything by choice. She hadn't chosen to come here – now she couldn't choose to stay on' (142).

The rest of the novel is about Chhobi's learning to make a choice, even in situations which appear to foreclose that possibility. She learns to stick to her decisions in the face of threats and humiliation. She insists on taking her exams, resists an arranged marriage, joins the communist workers in their famine relief efforts, falls in love with a co-worker, and ultimately leaves the village again for a college in Calcutta. Each of these episodes marks a new kind of political awareness that concerns her own person, her family, the village community and the nation. Chhobi is more than encouraged by Adhir, who virtually instructs her to keep fighting. When she first meets him upon returning from Chittagong, he asks her what her plans are,

> As if the question was being put to a young boy of the family, not to a mere girl called Chhobi – a frightened, disappointed, pathetic young girl. As if it were up to her to decide what she wanted to do.
>
> (158)

Adhir insists that women have to shape their own lives against all odds:

> the women in our society all have to carry this yoke, they are tortured endlessly – you have to understand this and make others understand. You have to try to free yourself from such exploitation. [. . .] Before I die I want to see at least one woman who is not afraid, who does not fall flat on her face at the first threat of pain.
>
> (159–60)

On another occasion, Adhir insists that their grandmothers' lives have not changed because they haven't rebelled. Thus, he puts the onus of change on women. It is a woman who reminds him that men who claim to think differently must also play some part in this process. Although Adhir has always supported Chhobi, he has taken the easy way out at moments when his own intervention might have helped.

For years now, Adhir has been in love with Maya, a woman from an extremely impoverished family who lives with an uncle and his large brood. Even when Chhobi was a little girl, it was clear to her that Maya was also in love with Adhir. In the years Chhobi was away, Maya was married by her family to a man of her own station, had been widowed, and has now returned to the village. She is still in love with Adhir, and heartbroken anew for he is dying of tuberculosis, which he describes as a 'prize he won in jail' (154). Who is to blame for the fact that all those many years ago, neither

Maya nor Adhir broke any conventions by entering into a relationship with each other? When Adhir teasingly tells Maya that Chhobi has been educated and is not 'illiterate like you', Maya bursts out: 'So I have stayed illiterate by choice have I? [. . .] There were so many young men ready to save the country. Why didn't at least one of them save me and teach me how to read and write?' (160). The revolutionary agenda did not include addressing the conditions of women, or indeed include them in the task of revolution. Adhir reminds Maya that *now* she is able to break all conventions to come and see him, braving gossip and even beatings from her aunt; the implication is that it was she who would not break them earlier. But, as we know, the creed of militant revolutionaries also precluded romantic attachments. A young Adhir would not have had any space for a Maya in his life. Moreover, he reveals that he once used to look at the convention-bound women in his family 'with contempt', as if they were to blame for their own lives of domestic slavery. He now advises Chhobi, 'if you hold other women in contempt, then you actually humiliate yourself; if you leave them behind, then you cannot go very far' (159).

In British jails, Adhir has picked up more than tuberculosis; like many other revolutionaries, he is now a communist. Although his new ideology has not allowed him to critically examine the dynamic between himself and Maya, it has taught him that revolutionary change entails the non-glamorous task of working with people, rather than blazing a defiant trail by himself. Accordingly, he has been organizing the Krishak Samiti or peasants' association. He no longer believes in the violent overthrow of the British. Some of his young comrades cannot quite understand his approach, for at the time of famine and starvation, it seems especially inadequate. Tamal, a young man newly arrived from Calcutta, reports that:

> People have started asking why shouldn't they loot the granaries when they are full of rice. Why must they go around half-naked while the shops are full of clothes. Why don't we raid them and loot everything? Why don't we get together and throw those beasts out by the scruff of their necks?
>
> (171)

This fictional discussion actually bears testimony to contemporary debates and disagreements within the CPI. Adhir explains his position without using the language that is deployed in Party publications or public meetings. He does not speak of a 'people's war' or the need to build an anti-fascist front, he does not mention the Japanese menace, or fascism at the door, although he does acknowledge that 'we are accused of looking towards another country and not our own'. Instead of harping on his patriotism however, he argues that to try and topple the British now would be premature. He can afford to work slowly for the long term because now he has a different model in mind:

> I deal with peasants and I think in their terms [. . .] but [. . .] I do understand one thing clearly. There's one country in the world which has brought radial change to human society. Many things depend upon its success or failure. An ideology is being tested – to see whether it will survive or not. [. . .] And

> because we have this great ideal before us, we can carry on with our small, arduous tasks with a smile. Because we believe in the future.
>
> (172)

Tamal agrees to 'help enforce the law and get the rice out of the hoarders' clutches, run relief kitchens and sing to raise funds. If the famine can be stopped that way, so be it'. But Adhir reminds the city boy that working amongst peasants is not quite so simple – it entails physical endurance and sharing their poverty. While not as glamorous as more dramatic oppositional actions – looting, bombing, taking up arms – it requires perseverance, hard work, and vision.

The novel shows how black-marketing and hoarding is not the work of some caricatured villains, as sections of the communist press were apt to suggest, but part of the social and economic structure of everyday life. Sections of Chhobi's own family have departed from feudal convention and set up shops; her father cannily suggests to his brothers that

> we will make a two hundred percent profit if we start stocking up from now. Imports from Burma stopped long ago and now even the government is building up its own reserves. All traders believe that prices will shoot up three or four times. There is no way for people to buy directly from the farmers. They are selling their produce fast to get a better deal before the government can acquire the stuff at a fixed price, according to new regulations.
>
> (168–69)

Chhobi had seen her grandfather thrash and insult poor peasants without reason. Now it is her usually mild and gentle father who becomes the worst exploiter. He is ranged against Adhir and Tamal and other young comrades who have vowed that they will not let a single villager go off to the city only to die there. The battle lines are sharply drawn, and they divide not just the village but also the family, suggesting that ideological positions are not automatically generated by one's class or even family affiliations.

Chhobi, who is already infuriating her grandparents and others in the family by continuing to study, and by continuing to visit Adhirka, is fiercely jolted by the sight of begging peasants at their kitchen door. She

> Was horror-struck – as though she had spotted a snake. Were these human beings? She saw three pairs of skeletal arms holding out their pots for the rice and phan, the liquid starch that Kakima [her aunt] was giving them . . . Chhobi had never seen such a ghastly spectacle of hunger. That girl of fifteen or sixteen, wrapped in rags, stretching out her skeletal hand for a pot of rice water to drink, was she Panchu Pal's daughter or was that Chhobi herself?

The famine is not a distant event, but literally at her door. Just as the landowners and traders are part of her own family, the starvelings are people Chhobi has grown up with, studied or played with.

Chhobi hears the same cry that Manikuntala Sen, P. C. Joshi, Chittaprosad and all the activists in Calcutta had heard – 'Give us something to eat, Ma, give us some starch, *phan daoo, Ma*' – on the threshold of her own home (191). She witnesses women hitting, scratching and tearing each other's hair in the scramble for scraps from her grand-uncle's kitchen. She had heard Adhirka's comrades vow they would not let a single villager die or leave: 'Was it all a pack of lies? And would people really continue to die in this man-made disaster? She had to find out what was happening.' Just as she had first crossed over into other forbidden territories – the boys' school-room and Adhirka's sick room –she now crosses the ultimate boundary by joining the peasant protests, and finally, working in the relief kitchen – all actions that are horrific to the men in her family. When she returns home with a glowing, happy face to find her father and grandfather waiting with a long cane 'boiling with rage, unbathed and unfed still, it struck her suddenly, like a hammer in her heart. That she must have done something quite extraordinary indeed'. Her mother is also incredulous at this new breach of boundaries: '"I just couldn't stay back, Ma." That was all Chhobi could say' (195). The novel suggests that Chhobi's political desires are a natural continuation of her earlier desires to study, to play with boys, and to empathise with the poor and vulnerable, and that her defiance grows from her earlier impulse to answer back rather than to cower in front of paternal authority.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, famine was generally understood as resulting in a crisis of male authority. In this novel, too, there is such a crisis, but it does not occur because hunger and starvation have caused a breach of domestic protocols and rendered women vulnerable. Instead it is caused because of female rebellion in the home, a rebellion which, the novel suggests, is necessary to successfully fight disasters such as the famine. Chhobi's grandfather recalls the days of yore

> When he used to come home, the very sound of his footsteps would send the women of the house scurrying, and howling children would go very quiet. [. . .] He was that same person still. Everyone in the house still trembled when he raised his voice. Everyone, except that daughter of Kulada.
>
> (198)

The challenge is all the more devastating because it comes from a person who 'ever since she had become aware [. . .] had heard that she was just a female – not a boy, not even a human being, just a girl' (188). Chhobi refuses to back down, and her defiance enables other acts of resistance; when her grandfather attempts to drag her home from the relief kitchen, she is rescued from a beating by Shashi Majhi, the peasant whom the grandfather had unjustly struck in her presence many years ago.

Things get harder for the peasants and for the comrades working with them. The winter crop fails, and the relief office is closed by the government. And Adhir succumbs to his illness. But there are indications of crucial changes afoot. Chhobi, despite being locked up, absolutely refuses to enter into an arranged marriage. For her grandfather, such defiance is connected to her class and caste transgressions: 'I should have known. Look at your companions, I must say. Peasant, fisherman, potter, what

not! Kulada, you better find out – maybe she wants to marry one of them' (227). Maya starts working in the gruel kitchen, where she finds the courage to stand up to a government official's bullying. She is at Adhir's deathbed, and in the presence of his parents, he asks his comrades to look after her. She isn't his wife, but part of his alternative family, a family that Adhir's father Ray Karta, comes to recognize when the peasants of Krishak Samiti want to take his body with them on a march. The family and village elders are aghast at the proposal, but the father says that he should be left 'with those to whom he belonged. He never belonged to us, he never thought about us' (238). There are clearly important shifts in the class and caste protocols of the village; we read that:

> Hundreds of half-clad, barefoot men – men who had once wept at Ray Karta's feet praying for tax relief, or a little more time to pay him his share of the harvest – they suddenly seemed to have gathered great courage. Ray Karta looked on balefully. A family member had died of a deadly disease, yet there were no proper purification rites, no Brahmin to light the pyre, and now these low-caste men were taking him away on their shoulders.
>
> (238)

Chhobi's grandmother sadly compares the huge number of people weeping for Adhir with the lack of mourners for her husband when he passed away.

The novel ends with the return of peasants to the land. There are no dreams of collective farming on the part of the peasants, as we see in *Nabanna* and *Dharti Ke Lal*. But here too there is the suggestion of a new determination, and a new political possibility: 'they sang songs of resolution – not to bow to death again, to stay alive, come what may' (241). The comrades, it is suggested, are back at work among them. Maya has decided to move to another village to become a teacher; her last words to Chhobi are: 'To love and be denied like me, that's a sin, Chhobi. No one should suffer as I have. See that it doesn't happen again' (240). If poverty and starvation are sins, so is the denial of nurturing affective relationships within and without the family. For such a sin not to recur, existing class and gender relations will need to be overhauled, and the comrades will need to recognize, and work towards, such change. Maya's words are a hint to Chhobi that she should both educate herself, and marry someone of her own choice. Maya knows that Chhobi and Tamal are in love; Tamal had said to Chhobi before leaving for Calcutta, 'I shall not forget you unless I lose faith in humanity – we are inseparable Chhobi.' His commitment to her is part of, instead of being counterposed against, his commitment to the larger cause.

Despite her consistent bafflement at Chhobi's actions, Mamata has quietly made the arrangements for her to live with a distant relative and attend college. She now tells her daughter: 'Go now and make your tryst with destiny' (242), her phrase echoing Jawaharlal Nehru's famous speech made to mark India's Independence:

> Long years ago, we made a tryst with destiny, and now the time comes when we shall redeem our pledge, not wholly or in full measure, but very

> substantially. At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom. A moment comes, which comes but rarely in history, when we step out from the old to the new, when an age ends, and when the soul of a nation, long suppressed, finds utterance.[30]

In the time frame of the novel, India's 'tryst with destiny' was yet to take place, but no Indian reader of the novel, which was written nearly a decade after Nehru's pronouncement, could miss the resonance or the distance between Nehru's pledge and Chhobi's moment of awakening to life and freedom. Nehru gives the word 'destiny' a new meaning, as something not pre-ordained but brought into being by the nationalist movement. But when Mamata asks Chhobi to make a tryst with destiny, Chhobi replies she 'did not believe in destiny' at all. The nationalist redefinition is not enough for her. A young girl could only attain her freedom, or give utterance to her 'soul', not simply by quarrelling with what society and her family understood to be her destiny but abandoning that idea altogether (Sanyal 242).

I have suggested that *Nabankur* embeds the Bengal famine of 1943–1944, and communist efforts to redress the suffering it entailed, in a more capacious narrative about female suffering and women's emancipation. In the novel, the communist movement comes of age alongside Chhobi – during her childhood Adhir is still a nationalist revolutionary, and by the time she grows up, he has matured into a communist who has created a collectivity that will survive after him. The famine allows the novel to depict a range of communist activities – from gruel kitchens and protests, to literacy classes and collective singing, and it also allows Chhobi to engage directly with public politics and also meet a romantic partner. But the novel most resolutely does not end with the romance between Chhobi and Tamal, and nor does it end with any easy victory for the communists. As Mamata sees Chhobi go, 'Her thoughts strayed as she followed Chhobi with her eyes. As if she wasn't watching Chhobi's departure anymore, but gazing back at a past that was a picture of failure.' Even as the novel sends Chhobi onto Calcutta and a new kind of coupledom and freedom, it insists on reminding us that her childhood friend Durga, and her mother, and many other women in the village, are still where they were. Without rethinking the everyday, systematic starvation of women of all classes, this conclusion suggests, there can be no socialist vision of the future.

Nabankur is both formally and ideologically quite different from the other communist representations of the famine that I have discussed. Sulekha Sanyal comments on the bitter class oppression of the countryside, the ferment of the nationalist movement, and the possibility of communist organizing through a narrative structured like a female *bildungsroman* and infused with a sharp sense of women's marginalization within the home and outside, *gharey* and *baire*.

The women communists who worked during the years of the famine had a different vocabulary; none of them accorded gender Sanyal's explicit centrality. And yet, as I have shown, their activism and cultural politics led them to engage with the problems of women in both spaces, particularly when a devastating crisis like the famine shattered the seemingly sharply defined boundary between home and world.

Their courageous, innovative actions opened up new spaces for women within the Communist Party and made it possible for poorer women to inhabit their historical role within the women's movement in India.

Notes

1 Sugata Bose and Ayesha Jalal suggest that between 3.5 and 3.8 million people were killed (157).
2 See, for example, the 'Manifesto of the Communist Party of India,' in Basu (129–36).
3 In British India, a maund was equivalent to roughly 82.28 pounds.
4 The phrase and suggestion is Paul Greenough's (166).
5 The report from which this quotation was taken was published in the November 14, 1943 edition of *People's War*.
6 Margaret Kelleher's *The Feminization of the Famine* points this out in great detail. I am indebted to Kelleher and to Parama Roy.
7 Kelleher (168); Parama Roy (399).
8 As K. A. Abbas the writer and film-maker was to memorably put it in his reminiscences, 'this cry became the dirge of Calcutta, the battle cry of a legion of the lost' (*Island* 264).
9 For an excellent analysis of these activities, see Dutta Gupta (177–229).
10 On this period of growth, see Saldanha and Panjabi. For a different perspective on the role of women in the movement, see Custers, *Women*.
11 They were not alone in the former – communist women worked among mill workers and peasants in many other parts of the country too.
12 This is noted and discussed by Parama Roy (402–3).
13 All references to this text are to the Nemichandra Jain's Hindi translation; translations from Hindi are mine.
14 Some of these pictures are reproduced in Roy.
15 The devastation wrought by the famine was pervasively represented and understood in this way, as Mrinal Sen's 1981 film *Akaler Shandhaney* (In Search of Famine) acknowledges and critiques. Roy offers an astute analysis of this film pointing out that Mrinal Sen suggests that the fixation upon 'honour [. . .] as one of the causes rather than as the casualty of famine' (409).
16 On this relationship between IPTA and peasants, see Malini Bhattacharya.
17 This must have surely been the *total* rather than the aggregate attendance.
18 I am indebted to Bhatia's analysis.
19 This passage is taken from the 'Draft Resolution of the All India People's Theatre Conference', which is reproduced in its entirety in Pradhan.
20 See, for example, Binayak Bhattacharya; and Damodaran.
21 On these folk influences, see Dharwadker (2005) and Bhatia (2004). For a contrary view, see Bharucha.
22 Some of this music, including Bhatia's ballad, has been recovered and recorded recently by Sumangala Damodaran. See her important discussion of it in *The Radical Impulse*.
23 Sheikh and Sathe also embodied the connections between communists and Dalit movements, despite the famous stand-off between S. A. Dange and B. R. Ambedkar. Sheikh's daughter married Dalit activist Namdeo Dhasal, and Sathe increasingly performed songs about caste oppression.
24 On Bardhan's life and work, see Pukayastha (79–107).
25 Dutt and Sarkar Munsi cite an interview with Tripti Mitra where she says that, on the first day of IPTA rehearsals, she felt that more sophisticated Party members were laughing at her way of dressing and her appearance (100).
26 For a detailed account of this problem, see 'Crisis in Bengal IPTA', in Pradhan (294–304). See also Damodaran (122).
27 The books I discuss here are but a fraction of this large output.

28 The bibliographic information for this text uses alternate spellings for the translator's name: Kwaja.
29 Communism is never explicitly mentioned in the novel, but it is unmistakably referenced by this history, the nature of Adhir's political work after his return, and his discussions with his comrades during the famine.
30 The speech is widely available. For an online version, see Nehru.

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6

THE FAMILY ROMANCE

Sigmund Freud used the phrase 'the romance of the family' to denote a child's fantasy about parents who are different – better born, or simply better – than his real ones; that is, the child wishes to become part of an idealized family. In his argument, the fictive parents are imagined precisely along the lines of the real ones, so that, Freud argues, 'in fact the child is not getting rid of his father but exalting him' (240). Freud identified the family romance as a universal feature of psychic life, part of an individual's effort to redress the traumas of infantile sexuality. However, his ideas have also been expanded and deployed to analyse images of the family that circulate in moments of historical crises. For instance, Lynn Hunt has argued in *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* that the revolutionary order during the French Revolution confirmed elements of the family dynamics outlined by Freud. In this chapter I engage with the powerful ideology of the communist family which, too, represented an idealized kinship structure for generations of young people. However, I will depart from Freud's premises and read this idealization as a desire for a new social and familial order rather than a compensation for individual trauma.[1]

As previous chapters have indicated, the romance of the communist family also generated the romance of the ideal communist couple. This couple was modern in that it had detached itself from older models of joint families, and yet it was different from the bourgeois couple because it was not nuclear in the same sense – it still belonged to a larger clan. The communist family, moreover, nurtured the professional revolutionary, who was single-mindedly devoted to the revolution. In 1943, 2,600 of the Party's members (roughly 16 per cent) were 'whole-timers', indicating 'that the organization was comparatively top-heavy with full time functionaries' (Overstreet and Windmiller 358). The system that emerged came out of an ideal that communists often expounded: 'there is no such thing as a part-time revolutionary'. A communist life was to be lived holistically. In India, the system was entrenched in a unique way because of the mass illiteracy among the working classes

and peasantry, which required a specialized cadre of leaders. Also, as CPI leader Mohit Sen noted in his memoirs, whole-timers were necessary because of the enormous distances in India, which mean that part-timers could not travel across the country (227). Even when such whole-timers gave up all their familial possessions and wealth, the latter could cushion them in many ways, allowing them education, social status, and confidence. However, given the voluntary poverty of the typical whole-timer, it became difficult to ensure that these attributes would pass down to the next generation. The romance of the communist family enabled many men and women to break with existing conventions but, like other romances, it was precarious. What would be the relationship between the larger family and the couple, or between the single-minded revolutionary and her partner, or children? Moreover, what was the relationship between the adoptive family (that of the Party) and the biological one? The latter was not always rejected, but could be incorporated into the communist family, or return in unexpected ways in later life.

In this chapter, I consider how four women whole-timers, all of whom were married to other whole-timers, narrated their experiences of communist and biological families, coupledom, Party life, and old age. These women – Vimla Dang from Punjab, Murtazai Shakeel from Hyderabad, Kondapalli Koteswaramma from Telangana, and Usha Dutta Verma from Bengal – all viewed the Party as family in their early years, but each had different ideas about what a family meant. For some of them the nuclear family and coupledom were the norm; for others, it was the extended family. Not all had, or wanted, children; they also had had different experiences with their biological families while growing up. The nature of these narratives is widely divergent too. Vimla Dang's *Fragments of an Autobiography* was written in English in 1957 when she was thirty-one; it remained unfinished, and foregrounds the story of her romance with her husband to be, while Kondapalli Koteswaramma's *The Sharp Knife of Memory* was written in Telegu when she was ninety-two and it spans the arc of her whole life, as does Usha Dutta Verma's memoir which was written in Bengali. Murtazai Shakeel's story is drawn from my interview with her, and is therefore more partial, but also more spontaneous. These women all speak about their manner of entry into the communist family, differences within the fold, their ongoing struggle for livelihood, and the difficulties of ageing. Their accounts allow us to see how the family romance eroded, or indeed remained robust, as they, and the Party, grew older from the 1930s and 1940s to the present.

*

Vimla's life with her comrade and husband Satyapal Dang in the industrial suburb of Chheharta outside Amritsar became the stuff of radical legend. Unlike Ushabai and S. A. Dange, between whom there was great asymmetry of fame and stature, the Dangs are famous *as a couple*, in their togetherness, each recognized as a leader both within the Party and in public life (see Plate 11). Vimla's brother Ravi, who published her

Fragments of an Autobiography in 2007, half a century after it was written, describes his visit to their home in 1965:

> They lived in a single-room accommodation with a small enclosed courtyard which had a hand pump to draw water. The courtyard served also for cooking and as a place for washing. Like other residents of their working-class colony at that time, they had to go to the fields early every morning as there was no toilet at home. They spent the hot Punjab summer like other workers' families without an electric fan. I witnessed the love and respect they enjoyed among the workers there and found them happy in spite of all the physical hardships. It was an inspiring trip for me.
>
> (Bakaya, 'Afterword' 112–13)

The couple lived in Chheharta for over 65 years in this stark simplicity, sharing the living conditions of workers, building up a model municipality which provided health care and civic amenities for them, including a free crèche for working mothers (the first such attempt in India). During the 1980s and 1990s, both were implacable opponents of the militant separatism that troubled Punjab, and they became known for their courageous, often risky, adherence to secularism. Vimla worked hard to provide shelter and care for hundreds of children who had lost their parents in the conflict. The Dangs chose to have no children so that they could devote themselves entirely to their work, showing what one journalist called an 'extraordinary capacity of a commitment to public life, that once inspired respect even among those who opposed them' (Bal). Their holistic approach became known as the 'Dang school' of politics, which was more admired than emulated; as an obituary of Satyapal put it, 'there are hardly any real followers of the courageous and conscientious political, social and cultural interventions that Dang and his wife, Vimla Dang, espoused since their entry into Punjab's political arena in the early 1950s' (Ramakrishnan).

Fragments of an Autobiography concentrates entirely on Vimla's courtship with Satyapal, dwelling on the personal, the intimate, and the romantic, which could otherwise be regarded as unimportant for a couple devoted to public life. In tone and sensibility, it is like a diary, recording every significant moment that passed between them, and providing a detailed record of the ups and downs of their courtship. But, at another level, it is the opposite of a diary, for it is narrated in third person, and the main characters are given pseudonyms – Vimla refers to herself as Rashmi, to Satyapal as Sukant, and to her brothers Shashi and Ravi as Sukesh and Rakesh; most of the other people in the book, however, retain their real names. Thus, the book simultaneously records the intimate, the intensely personal, and distances it from the speaking self. In a foreword to the book, Ravi Bakaya writes: 'This method – as we know – is used by some sensitive writers as it enables them to write frankly about themselves and about people and events they would otherwise find it difficult to describe' (Foreword 7). Given that the book was not intended for publication, and that it is preoccupied with her love story, it clearly enabled Vimla to express her own

feelings to herself, and perhaps to Satyapal. Even though at every stage of the love story, the pair's political beliefs and commitments dictate, shape, and even justify the romance, it still remains unique in its privileging of the inner life.

Vimla Bakaya was precisely the kind of educated communist woman to whom Ushabai Dange contrasts her own self; indeed, Vimla mentions as her close friend and confidante the same Nargis Batlivala whom Ushabai recalls as tormenting her in jail. Unlike Ushabai's conservative clan, Vimla's Kashmiri Pandit family was progressive; they lacked wealth – as a child, she writes, she could not participate in school dance performances which required her to have a white frilly frock because her family could not afford such a garment (Dang 14).[2] But in the cosmopolitan city of Lahore, she attended a school which Mrinalini Chattopadhyay, Sarojini Naidu's younger sister, had developed into the 'leading institution of Lahore' (13). Unlike Ushabai too, Vimla entered political life early. At 14, she writes, she composed a song dedicated to Gandhi and Mrinalini Chattopadhyay invited her to sing it at a gathering in her house. But there, her Gandhianism was nipped in the bud as one of the women present remarked,

> 'You better tell your Gandhi Baba to change his ideology.' Although said in a joke, this remark led Rashmi to think deeply. The woman who said this was Suhasini, Sarojini Naidu's youngest sister, who had a most striking personality. Suddenly, Rashmi heard her deep voice singing, 'The people's flag is deepest red' and 'Utho jago, bhukhe bandi!' Rashmi was stirred by these powerful and inspiring songs, which lit in her the burning fire of patriotism. She noticed that the singer's face turned red and her eyes almost spat fire as she sang these songs and raised her clenched fist to show her determination to fight for freedom. (15)

It is curious that Vimla should say that the songs lit 'the burning fire of patriotism' in her, for neither is 'patriotic'.[3] And if this was patriotism, what sentiment had Gandhi aroused in her earlier? For the adult Vimla who is narrating the story, certainly socialism is patriotism (as the Party insisted), and she presents this childhood moment as one which already links the two.

The woman who interjected was Suhasini Chattopadhyay, Mrinalini's younger sister, and the first woman to join the Communist Party of India. Neither Marxist nor feminist histories have paid much attention to her and many of her seven siblings have overshadowed her, since they became major figures on the nationalist scene, especially the eldest, Sarojini Naidu. But Suhasini steered Vimla, and her siblings, as well as many other young people, towards Marxism and it is worth recounting some aspects of her life here. Her politics was closest to that of the second eldest sibling, her brother Virendranath Chattopadhyay, popularly known as 'Chatto', who had a chequered career – he established contact with the Second International in Berlin, and tried to get Soviet support to establish an Indian Communist Party, (in which effort he was beaten by his rival M. N. Roy). He also set up the League Against Imperialism in Berlin, and then, with the coming of the Nazis, moved to Moscow and worked in the Academy of Sciences, until he was executed during Stalin's purges

in the 1930s.[4] At 18, Suhasini married A. C. Nambiar, Subhas Chander Bose's associate, and, in November 1926, followed him to Berlin. Virendranath had been living there for some years, including on and off with the radical American Agnes Smedley. Suhasini attended the University of the Toilers of the East in Moscow, which had been established in 1921 by the Comintern for communists from the colonized world. With the strengthening of Nazi power and increasing persecution of dissidents, Virendranath escaped to Moscow; Suhasini herself escaped by hiding as a stowaway on a boat to India. Upon arrival in Bombay, her passport was impounded by the British government, and she was hounded by the police (Sahgal, *A Revolutionary Life* 7). Although she joined the Communist Party, which had been formed only four years earlier in December 1925, she evidently also had ties with militant revolutionaries for, in September 1929, she appears to have chaired a meeting of Bhagat Singh's Bharitya Naujawan Sabha at a condolence meeting for the revolutionary Jatin Das who had died in prison (Rana 77). But soon she had to go underground, because, although not formally an accused in the Meerut Conspiracy Case, she came under increased surveillance during its proceedings.

While underground, Suhasini stayed awhile in the house of Ammu Swaminadhan, the social activist, and mother of Lakshmi Sahgal, who later commanded the women's regiment in Subhas Bose's Indian National Army. The young Lakshmi writes that she was mesmerized by Suhasini:

> I was very attracted to her and wanted to know all about her exciting and adventurous life. I used to sit up night and after night while the rest of the household slept, and listen to her. It was from her that I first heard about communism. [. . .] She convinced me that the Congress, including Pandit Nehru and Gandhi, only wanted to substitute brown rulers with white ones, and that it had no revolutionary agenda. [. . .] Later, when I commanded the Rani Jhansi Regiment in the Indian National Army (INA), its 1,500 women soldiers were fighting not only for the liberation of our country but also for the emancipation of women.[5]

As Lakshmi's daughter Subhashini Ali, herself a communist activist, observed,

> Lakshmi was fortunate that the first Communist she met was not just someone with a wide knowledge and experience of revolutionary theory and practice but also a person imbued with the joy of living and changing and, even, just having fun. Suhasini had a wonderful, deep voice and, on some evenings, she would sing out to the hapless policemen waiting for a glimpse of her at the Gilchrist Gardens' gate, 'Somebody over there really loves me.' [. . .] That was not all. She also taught Lakshmi to sing the Internationale.
>
> ('Communist Captain')

Having parted from Nambiar earlier, Suhasini married R. M. Jambhekar, who had also joined the Communist Party at the same time as she had. Striking in appearance – the

American journalist Edgar Snow described her as 'the most beautiful woman he had ever met' (Hamilton 34) – she was also, according to Vimla's brother Ravi Bakaya, 'an extraordinarily gifted organizer' who best worked by establishing personal and direct contact with people. Under Suhasini's influence, he writes, 'the entire Bakaya family was drawn into radical politics. [. . .] She was interested not in 'mere politics' but also in music, literature and the arts' (Bakaya, 'Life and Times').[6]

Ravi and Vimla's eldest brother Shashi (Sukesh in Vimla's narrative) happened to be a budding but miserable poet. The misery, Ravi writes, was due to the fact that he was 'criticised by the Lahore student leadership, who thought he was wasting his time, playing cricket and writing poetry in revolutionary times' (Bakaya, 'Afterword' 118). But Suhasini read Shashi's poems, took them seriously, and encouraged him to write, and finally invited him to come to Bombay, to attend college there and live in her home.[7] It was an unusual relationship through which we get the glimpse of an alternative communist family forged by ideological ties. For five years Shashi lived with Suhasini and Jambhekar, and Vimla felt that his long stay with them distanced him from his own family. Dropping out of college after a year to become a full-time worker of the Communist Party, Shashi continued to write poetry, but of a very different sort. Vimla writes that whereas he 'used to write love lyrics [. . .] after meeting Suhasini, [he] started writing about the freedom struggle' (Dang 58). Many of Shashi Bakaya's songs became enormously popular within the movement, although many of them are rather formulaic, including one that exhorts a woman to feed the child of the future to whom she will give birth: 'Feed him as you can, / O! Woman / For he is the future's free / Woman and man' (53). Still, Suhasini praised the poems and used to recite them at meetings. When Shashi died in 1946 at the age of 25 from an infected needle after he gave blood to those injured in communal clashes, Suhasini 'almost lost her mind, for she had developed a very deep attachment to Sukesh' (52). Vimla comments that although their own mother was deeply pained, it was Suhasini who had 'reared him as a passionate patriot', and 'in his death she suffered both as a comrade and as a mother' (60).

Shashi was the first to become politicized by Suhasini, but the rest of the family, including some cousins, followed. In 1942, when a chapter of Friends of the Soviet Union was set up in the Bakaya home in Lahore:

> Rashmi, like the other children, felt that something very great was happening to them all. Suhasini talked to all the children individually and gave them real solid lectures, creating in them a great urge for self-cultivation and self-improvement. [. . .] Rashmi thought with pride that someday their country would also become like the USSR and be rid of the squalor and poverty, backwardness and illiteracy.
>
> (19)

Suhasini's influence on the brothers no doubt made it easier for the girls to also engage in political work. Vimla joined women comrades for study circles and then in active work in the walled city with them, with the student union, and with the Party's

Cultural Squad. Although the family had never been ultra conservative, it was traditional enough for Vimla to feel that her world had changed: 'from a life full of social restrictions, entirely confined to the walls of the house, Rashmi began to experience a sense of social liberation. She thought her family was amongst the luckiest in the world. The girls mixed freely with the boys, attended meetings and other programmes. [. . .] For Rashmi this was an entirely different life, a life of constant struggle, of constantly aspiring to achieve something' (20). She had come across girls whose studies were discontinued by their parents or who were married off because their parents feared they might join the communist movement, and had even 'seen another girl beaten by her father in public for continuing to do work in the students' movement' (31). Clearly Lahore had not changed that much from the time Prakashvati Pal had to run away from home to evade an arranged marriage and continue political work. It had become more acceptable to join the mainstream nationalists, but communism was an entirely different proposition.

Even though Vimla realized that she was the only girl 'who was working with the approval of her own people and thus could move around freely' (31) it is a measure of the gender hierarchy at her home that when she was invited to go to Bombay with the Punjab Cultural Squad, she was 'afraid of Rakesh', thinking he would oppose the idea (24). He did allow her to go, but upon her return, he opposed her formally joining the Communist Party on the grounds that 'she was too young and did not understand the full implications of joining the Party' (24). Still, their unit of the family had moved firmly away from the conservatism of the larger clan. When Vimla's father, who was working with the Hindustani section of the BBC in London, suddenly died, his parents, along with the entire larger clan, wanted to move in with Vimla's mother and her children. They disapproved of the way the younger Dangs were living, and some aunts spread 'whole series of baseless slanders [. . .] [including] the rumour that something very dangerous like making bombs and explosives was going on at Birdwood Road. [. . .] [But] no one paid any heed. It was impossible for old ideas to get reconciled with new ideas. It was difficult for those who had seen light to go back and live in darkness' (23). In this instance, politics had thoroughly overhauled the domestic.

Suhasini and Shashi now urged the family to move to Bombay, which they did in 1944. Although the family saw Suhasini as the angel who first brought light into the household, Vimla began to sense an underside to Suhasini's 'dominating and all-pervasive personality' which would not tolerate differences of opinion:

> Suhasini loved the family, but at the same time she wanted them to do whatever she liked. Rashmi was made to believe that Suhasini always did everything for their good. If she scolded the youngsters, it was to teach them to be better communists, better patriots and more dedicated revolutionaries.
>
> (37)

Nevertheless, Suhasini's influence was hard to shake off. Vimla was also convinced that Suhasini would not approve of her 'friendship and attachment with Sukant'

(Satyapal Dang) whom she had first met on her trip to Bombay for the Party Congress. Nor would her family, she guessed, but on quite different grounds – he was a non-Kashmiri.

From this point on, the narrative is dominated by Vimla's meetings with and feelings about Satyapal Dang, who she had been meeting in Lahore, and who had also moved to Bombay to work in the AISF secretariat. The story reads like a romance narrative where the female protagonist dwells on every significant look and touch, every misunderstanding and heartbreak. But even as it is clear that she is falling in love with him, she is at pains to stress that it grew out of shared political ideas and need for comradeship within the organization. Thus, the first time the rather aloof Satyapal/Sukant comes to talk to her, it is to ask 'her for some facts about the work of the girl students of Lahore' (26). Despite his being 'rather too simple in his appearance and careless about his dress and looks' she admires the way 'he argued out his points and convinced others' (27). When he offers to escort her home after a meeting she is pleased and plies him with questions: 'Why do comrades quarrel when they differ with one another? [. . .] Should all communists behave in this way?' and then finally 'Who is there to point out my mistakes and criticise me so that I may also learn to improve myself?' Sukant put his hand softly on Rashmi's shoulder and said, 'I am there. I will help you'' (27). That she might also help *him* is not even a possibility because it is clear that he is the leader, and the senior. Because at the same time her brother Ravi was also helping her read Marxist texts, ('Together they studied several chapters of the "History of the CPSU". Rashmi would read and Rakesh would explain everything to her'), Satyapal comes to occupy a position of authority analogous to that of her brother.

In middle-class India, one the few sanctioned male–female relationships possible among young unmarried people is that of brother and sister, and therefore to find young people either adopting each other as siblings or pretending to be so is not unusual. Vimla narrates that she told Satyapal that she had always looked upon him as a brother – with disastrous results:

> In her simplicity, she completely failed to understand that her reply would hurt Sukant's feelings badly. She could not imagine, could never conceive that what she had just said would hurt Sukant so much that he would simply break off, stop talking to her. To the simple girl that she was, the logic of her answer was clear, 'If I cannot tell him I love him, if I want to take some time to decide the question, I can at least put him on the same level as my own brothers, whom I love so deeply.' But she did not know that this itself would be sufficient reason for Sukant to cut her off completely.
>
> (38–39)

As in a romance novel, in Vimla's memoir, the female experiencing subject is unsure that her powerful feelings are reciprocated. The reader knows that she loves him, even though she may not have the vocabulary for it, but both she and the reader are left guessing as to his feelings. He observes when other men become close to her: 'The Bengal student leader who had led Rashmi's squad had become very friendly with

her and Rashmi [. . .] felt that he was taking a keen interest in her. She also knew that Sukant had noticed this development.' (30). When he rebuffs her and she starts 'moving with other comrades', he 'developed friendship with another girl, so much so that this became a subject of talk amongst other comrades. Rashmi was deeply hurt' (39). She is 'absolutely convinced about Sukant's new affair' (39).

But this is a love story with a communist twist. Satyapal is now the general secretary of the All India Students' Federation (AISF), Vimla has been appointed to its top committee, and she feels 'they should start talking with each other, *just like other comrades*, and change their very embarrassing and unusual relationship' (48; emphasis added). For a generation of men and women for whom working with one another in close proximity was absolutely new, and who had no established models to draw on, the new vocabulary of camaraderie was as handy as the more established one of sibling love. Vimla sought to use both simultaneously: 'We should talk to each other, discuss things normally, and behave *like any other comrades*. [. . .] And remember, I respect you just as much as I do my own brothers' (49; emphasis added). But she then realizes that neither of those two is adequate to capture their feelings:

> Little did she know then that the breaking of the ice would once again open the outlets of their hearts from which warm affectionate love would start flowing afresh. Sukant also thought that what Rashmi desired was the normalization of their relations as between two comrades who had dedicated their lives to a noble cause. He could not think, nor could he imagine that his old feelings would resurface once more with added force.
>
> (49–50)

Whereas a diary records the perspective of the writer, a romance also occasionally lets us know, as Vimla does, what the male protagonist is thinking and feeling, even as at other moments, it keeps the female protagonist in suspenseful agony wondering if her love is returned.

Vimla's narrative is unusual among communist autobiographies in India for its close attention to every up and down of romantic love. But at the same time, it is at pains to assure the reader that this is more than romance in the conventional sense. (It should be noted that Satyapal was the only reader of the diary on which the book is based). But as Rashmi searches for the right language with which to describe her experience, she ultimately falls back on the form and vocabulary of a conventional romance:

> 'Is this friendship?' Sukant asked.
> 'Of course, this is very good friendship', Rashmi asserted.
> 'Is this just friendship or something else too?' asked Sukant,
> Rashmi looked down and said sadly, 'What is the use of telling you now?'
> 'Why? What has happened?'
> 'You have other friends', said she.
> 'Are you angry with me?'

> 'No, what right have I to be angry with you?' Suddenly her voice broke and she said, 'I don't want you ever to be angry with me again.'
> 'Rashmi, Rashmi, do you love me? Say "yes" or "no"'.
> Rashmi was taken aback. She looked up at Sukant with her eyes full of love.
> 'Didn't you know it all this time?'
> In a moment she found her head resting on Sukant's shoulders. Sukant held her with his hands and kissed her face, her eyes. [. . .] He raised her face to his and said, 'My dearest, my dearest!' All their pent up feelings burst out in a torrent.
>
> (82)

It is not surprising that Vimla Dang's dialogue and description harkens towards English-language romances, themselves derived from the staples of English fiction such as *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, which she probably read in school and college. English novels, we must remember, were key in engendering ideals of companionate monogamous marriage in India.[8]

In this memoir, however, the romance novel meets the stories of the ideal communist union which travelled outwards from the Soviet Union. For example, Raphael Samuel remembers poring over *The Lenin Album* when he was a young man in Britain:

> The Lenin Album was my bible at this time, a sumptuously produced volume of facsimile reproductions, photographs and pictures. There were only five copies in the country, I was told, and my uncle was the proud possessor of one of them. It introduced me to the idea of clandestinity and persecution, revolution and counter-revolution, barricades and strikes. I think it was here that I acquired an early ideal of the intellectual life and the companionate marriage – a picture of Lenin and Krupskaya in their Siberian exile, a house whose only furniture was books which each was engaged in reading, Lenin at his desk, Krupskaya by the window. Another affecting picture showed an illegal study circle, with Lenin as the teacher and the attentive faces of the workers lit up by the light of an oil-lamp.
>
> (48)

In the only *Lenin Album* that I have been able to trace there are no domestic pictures of Lenin and Krupskaya, although there are pictures of them together with workers, or in meetings, and other well-known images of their domestic life in Siberia.[9] But the point is neither to verify whether Samuel actually saw them, nor to suggest that they had the same status in India, but to indicate how the ideal of communist companionate marriage powerfully circulated through cadres in different parts of the world.

Such an ideal allowed Indian communists to understand their own relationships as both rebellious – after all 'love marriages' were not the norm for most Indians – and yet intensely moral; over the first half of the twentieth century, non-monogamous, non-

heterosexual relationships became increasingly marginalized. Vimla Dang always viewed her relationship with Satyapal as not in the least bit conventional; in an interview late in life she asserted:

> My marriage to Satya Pal [*sic*] Dang is different from usual matrimonial arrangements in the sense that we are equals in all sense. We are both working in our respective fields outside home, and when at home, we share domestic responsibilities like equals too. He has taken more than his share of responsibility for domestic work as I am unable to attend to certain things because of health reasons.
>
> ('Touch that Soothes the Victims of Violence')

Recall that Ushabai Dange also writes about her sharing domestic labour with her husband. But Ushabai indicates a constant asymmetry within the relationship with Dange who is the Party leader who keeps her waiting, while she is the one primarily responsible for the household and the children. Ushabai imagined a home with Dange, and the politics came after. Even when politics became important for her, her book suggests that the home she craved was always a refuge from politics. For Vimla, the politics and the romance, the politics and the home, were inseparable. In Prague, where they finally confessed their love for one another,

> Rashmi showed Sukant passages from her diary, confirming her continuing and ever-increasing affection for him, and her heart's desire to work and live with him, devoting her life to the fulfilment of the cause which they both cherished so ardently.
>
> (Dang 88)

Their relationship is to be cemented through and anchored by their common cause. Note the importance of *writing* in this passage. It is the diary of her innermost thoughts that offers incontrovertible proof of her love and constancy.

Vimla's brother tells us that many friends and relatives had read the manuscript and thought it should be published 'because she was both an eyewitness and an active participant in many historic events described there' (7). But, in fact, the historic events – be they the INA revolt in Bombay, which resulted in many lives lost, or the Independence and partition of India – are always a backdrop to the emotional drama, the unfolding romance. The book describes how Vimla went to Prague as the AISF representative in the International Union of Students (IUS), a post-war organization which was meant to establish anti-fascist solidarities across the world, but which was soon dominated by communist students' groups and fractured by Cold War hostilities.[10] It spends minimal time on Vimla's work in the organization, and moves to the moment when Satyapal arrived in Prague to attend the IUS council meeting. Being abroad was important to both of them: 'Here, in Prague Rashmi was quite free to move around with Sukant; no social restrictions prevented their being with one

another. . . . For the first time, she really felt absolutely free. . .' (Dang 78). It is in Prague that they finally acknowledge their love, and Rashmi gives Sukant her diary to read so he can follow her emotional journey. As he reads, Sukant is distraught: 'Oh, Rashmi! What have you done? Why did you keep me in the dark all this time?' The implication is that Sukant has indeed turned to another woman in the belief that Rashmi no longer loves him. Despite the relief and joy of discovering mutual love, Rashmi tells him to marry that woman when he returns: 'In her sense of consideration to Sukant's friend, Rashmi was making the biggest sacrifice of their common happiness, a happiness that she had felt and enjoyed for barely two months, after a long period of suffering' (93). Almost as if the word 'suffering' has reminded her of it, Vimla tells us that at this time

> Partition had brought untold suffering to the people of India and Pakistan. Sukant received disturbing news about his family [. . .] [his] family had been forced to migrate from Lyallpur to Delhi. Full news about his sisters had not been received.
>
> (93)

But she does not dwell on this theme for more than one paragraph, returning to Sukant's departure from Prague to India, and her slipping him a love-note. Large historical events are not discounted so much as decentred by the personal drama.

The book ends with an account of the rest of Vimla's days in Prague. Suhasini and her husband had arrived there, intending at first to stay only for a short time, but they 'soon found that they could not return home with conditions prevailing at the country at that time' (100). This could be a reference to the bitter inner-Party differences that had resulted in the ousting of P. C. Joshi at the Second Congress of the CPI in Calcutta in 1948, the establishment of B. T. Ranadive as the new leader, the adoption of a new Party line that declared complete and militant opposition to the Congress government, and the clampdown on communists that followed. According to a personal account by Mohit Sen, the Jambhekars and Vimla too, were 'aggressive exponents of what had come to be known as the Ranadive line'; worse, they reported to the new leadership on the supposed counter-revolutionary activities of some comrades based in Europe, resulting in the persecution of the latter by the Communist Party in Czechoslovakia. All this, Sen writes, 'was too frighteningly real at that time when Stalin and the Stalinists were making their last assault on all their real and imagined enemies. [. . .] Denunciations and counter-denunciations were the order of the day' (78–79).[11]

Whether Mohit Sen is right about the Jambhekars, or whether his account is coloured by his own loyalties to the opposite faction, it is true that Party factionalism distorted all relationships within it. Shaukat Kaifi writes that when P.C. Joshi was removed, 'everything about the Party had changed. Sectarianism was rife and there was none of the old camaraderie. The comrades regarded each other with suspicion as though a spy was lurking in every corner' (69). Asked in an interview if it was true that husbands and wives were asked to keep watch on one another, Perin Romesh

Chandra said it was 'not like that' but that both she and husband 'were kept under vigilance because we were both considered to be close to P. C. Joshi; we were both considered to be reformists'. She hastily adds that this was 'not the norm', but shortly later admitted that that there was a pervasive 'fear of being called a reformist. [. . .] Any little fault or any little mistake would be traced back to our bourgeois background or our reformist background or things like that. So it was not a healthy, free atmosphere' (Chandra 88–90).

The official Party line of the Communist Party changed once again in 1951, with Ajoy Ghosh taking over from B. T. Ranadive, but not the methods of work and the attitude of complete suspicion towards those who thought differently. When the Jambhekars returned to India in 1951 (as did Vimla), they were regarded with widespread suspicion, and according to Ravi Bakaya, 'virtually debarred from all political activity' (Afterword 131). Vimla and Satyapal married in 1952 and she moved to Chheharta in 1954, initially teaching in a college to supplement their income, but then becoming a whole-timer in 1958. Perhaps Vimla's narrative stops in Prague because she found it hard to write about that period and its aftermath. It is even possible that the 'Dang school of politics' with its immersion in local politics, and its attempt to forge principled conversations across political divides was shaped by the memory of the intense sectarianism of those years and the desire to find an alternative model of communist work. Because Vimla chose not to add anything to the original when *Fragments* was published in 2007, it is also possible that, in retrospect, she found it contained what she found most worth retelling – the making of a communist love story.

*

Both Ushabai Dange and Vimla Dang, different as they were from one another, were well-known figures, and married to prominent Party members. Murtazai Shakeel was also married to a Party whole-timer, and was one herself, but neither she or her husband were national figures. I interviewed her in Delhi where she lives with her son and daughter-in-law. The first thing Murtazai says to me is: 'why do you want to interview *me*? I was never anyone important. I was the comrade who brought in the tea, and spread the durries at the meetings'. Our entire conversation is punctuated by similar demurrals: 'What do you want to know about me?' She insists that her story is not important to understanding anything about the Communist Party or its history. And I insist that I am not interested in official histories, but in her own stories, how she felt as a young woman, what was allowed, what was disallowed, and what was exciting for her. I explain to her that I want to talk with her because I remember her from my youth. My mother has accompanied me when I visit her, and this makes our conversation even more relaxed because the two of them have had a long and continuous association. Murtazai worked in the trade unions in Delhi, and my mother in the women's front, but they overlapped in Communist Party meetings and functions.

Like Shaukat Kaifi, Murtazai hailed from a progressive family in Hyderabad, and like Shaukat, her contact with the Party was through a family member who was a poet. Like Shaukat too, Murtazai speaks in chaste Urdu, apologizing for not knowing

Hindi or English. She tells me that in school she learnt Urdu, Persian and, in the sixth class, English: 'Very high class English. Today's English is not of such high quality. My teacher had a pince-nez. In our house, they said why are you learning the colonizer's tongue? My father hid our English books. He was faithful to his nation.' But at another point in our conversation, she says, 'the one complaint I have against my father is that I was not allowed to learn English'. Perhaps for this reason, she was determined to send her only child to an English medium school rather than to the *madrassa* which was her husband's choice. Recall that Shaukat and Kaifi were similarly determined. I do not know if Murtazai noted the irony that whereas she herself knows no Hindi or English, her son knows no Urdu; by the time she was a parent, that language had been devalued as the lingua franca of the North Indian literati, and marginalized as the tongue of a religious minority. Murtazai is proud to tell me that this son – her only child – was never given Muslim religious instruction. Not that she was an atheist, she says, but she worked so hard for the Communist Party that she had no time for *namaaz*: 'I read it in the morning before I went, but then there was no time after that.' But one day, her husband's aunt came from Pakistan: 'she berated me for not teaching him the *namaaz*. I retorted, "what is *namaaz* or prayer after all? What is it to serve God? Our principles are derived from Hazrat Ali – he enunciated the best principles of communism: work for the poor, for the labourers. No service can be higher than this"'.

Unlike Shaukat Kaifi, but like Vimla Dang, Murtazai's communism was honed within her natal family. Her older brother Niaz Haider was a radical poet, and comrade of literary giants such as Kaifi Azmi, Ismat Chugtai, and Sajjad Zaheer. Whereas Shaukat's narrative, like those of Ushabai and Vimla, is dominated by the figure of her husband, Murtazai's conversation focuses on Niaz Haider:

> I didn't know anything about the communist party. My brother didn't marry. He said to our mother, Amma I want something. She said: What do you want? What is more precious than you? He said, give me Munni. From my childhood, he wanted me. He was like a father figure. [. . .] He taught me everything, how the economy works, how communism arose. Whether you call him my teacher, or my leader, he taught me more than I could have learnt from a whole lifetime in a college. He taught me Urdu literature, told me to read. [. . .] He was always high, drunk. He always kept a pencil with him, and said look, this pencil is like a true lover. She never abandons you till the last breath, like a true lover, she never finishes till the end. He said, I know everyone will beat me if I ask you to drink alcohol. But to keep me company, you drink tea. From eight at night till 4 in the morning, he used to compose poetry and I would write it down. [. . .] It's because of that I have never made a mistake with language. [. . .] One of his beautiful nazams was: *Ilm ki malik janta hai* (the people are the masters of knowledge).

I want to hear the couplet, I tell her, and about your brother, but I also want to hear about you. 'Why?' asks Murtazai. 'What will you do with these stories?' Murtazai

starts to tell me about her husband Shakeel, who started working with Y. D. Sharma, one of the first members of the Party in Delhi. But again, I interrupt her, saying 'I don't want the history of the Party, but your story.'

Murtazai thinks, then goes back to her childhood. One overwhelming memory she has is of hiding in a field to escape the violence against Muslims in Hyderabad after the first Home Minister of independent India, Vallabhbhai Patel, sent in the army in September 1948 to forcibly annex the state to the Indian union. Hyderabad's Nizam or ruler, Mir Usman Ali, had refused to join India or Pakistan, claiming independent status; he was also facing a popular and armed peasant uprising led by the Communist Party of India. The Nizam's paramilitary organization, known as the Razakars, led by Kasim Rizvi, had aided his police in brutalizing the rebels. The Indian press at the time portrayed these 'as attacks on Hindus rather than communists' (Purushotham 443). This gave Patel an added pretext for military intervention. While it is well known that the Indian army clamped down on the Nizam's forces, and on the communists, it is often forgotten that ordinary Muslims were subsequently massacred by the army as well as local Hindus, the latter egged on by right-wing Hindu organizations: one scholar estimates that '*one-tenth to one-fifth of the male Muslim population* primarily in the countryside and provincial towns' lost their lives (Pernau 336).

Nehru sent in a team headed by a Congressman, Pandit Sunderlal, to investigate; but its report was kept secret until 2013 when a historian obtained a copy. It concluded that between 27,000 and 40,000 people lost their lives.[12] Murtazai, who was only 11 or 12 at the time, recalls what happened with horror: 'If you had a nose-ring, they cut your nose, if an ear-ring they cut your ear. If a mother was feeding her baby, they would snatch it from her lap and cut it.' Rapes were rife, as was looting and arson. Murtazai was sent off to Latur, where a married sister lived. But Latur was not a safe space – it saw large-scale violence against Muslims which, according to the Sunderlal Report, went on for 20 days. The sisters were protected by a local grocer, who was the elder sister's 'rakhi-brother'. In communist annals too, this violent history is side-lined. Although communist leader P. Sundarayya noted in his account of the Telangana movement that 'ordinary Muslim people' were 'pounced upon and untold miseries were inflicted on them', and he held the army responsible, and claimed that Telangana, where communists had 'liberated' thousands of villages, was free of such attacks. Recent scholarship has made it abundantly clear that the army was not the sole – or even the main – culprit, and that Telangana was not excluded from the violence, which suggests that perpetrators included some communists as well (Sundarayya 188–89).[13] Still, the Marathwada area (in which Latur lies) was the worst affected, and the town was also targeted because it was the home of Kasim Rizvi.

Back in Hyderabad city, Murtazai, like Shaukat, used to go to meetings where the progressive poets read their verses; her brother, Niaz Haider, not only performed with them, but moved away to Bombay where many of the progressive writers lived. Like Kaifi and so many other poets associated with the Party, he started writing lyrics for Bombay films. The family in Hyderabad lost touch with him for nearly eight years. Then, in 1957, they heard that he was in Delhi. Murtazai says she was

determined to find him, so in April of that year she and her sister donned their burqas and boarded a train to Delhi, where they knew absolutely no one. They decided they could best locate him through the Communist Party. Upon arrival, Murtazai approached a Sikh taxi driver and asked if he could take them to the Party office. 'The party with a red flag?' he asked? 'People knew the Communist Party at that time', she notes with some pride, 'It was the number 2 party in the country then, so everyone knew it.' They arrived at the Party office in Asaf Ali Road, to the shock of the comrades there: 'Someone had told Niazbhai that his younger sister was dead – so he told everyone I have no one in this world. After that, he was not in touch with his family at all. He was like that.'

The sisters started living with Niaz Haider, who was by all accounts totally maverick and extremely talented. Stories about his spontaneous creation of poetry, and later theatre-scripts, his fondness for drink and marijuana, his generosity to artists in need, and his volatility, circulated among creative circles in Delhi and Bombay.[14] Unlike Kaifi, who proudly displayed his membership of the Communist Party, Niaz Haider described such formal affiliation like putting a collar on a dog, Murtazai says. So, although he persuaded Murtazai to shed her veil (actually dousing it with kerosene and burning it one day), and encouraged her to work for the Party, he enjoined her never to take money for this work, for then she would become vulnerable to the Party's dictates. He knew of course that she would need financial support. Therefore, even though he would regularly be found drunk or stoned and penniless on the streets, he would periodically send her generous sums of money earned by selling his poetry to the film industry.

I ask about her marriage. Murtazai is unsure what to say: 'You are doing a post-mortem on me', she tells me. I laugh and assure her that I have only just begun. Then she launches into a story. The Party arranged her marriage to Shakeel Ahmed, a trade unionist and whole-timer under whom she had worked. Shakeel had been married previously, and his wife had died ten years earlier. His family had all migrated to Pakistan. Niaz Haider was not thrilled at the idea of Murtazai marrying Shakeel, or indeed anyone. When he finally accepted, he suggested that they reverse the custom of the *baraat*, or the groom's party which goes to the bride's house. 'Instead', he declared, 'we of the girls' party will bring a *baraat* to the party office' which was Shakeel's only home. Murtazai wants her daughter-in-law to hear the story about her marriage, so we call her into the room. Murtazai went on:

> In the Qur'an, it is written that the *mehr* of Bibi Fatima, the Prophet's daughter, was one and a quarter hundred dinars. So an ideal *mehr* should be neither more than that nor less than that. In my marriage, they were talking about Rs. 11,000. Several party comrades decided to tease Shakeel, and ask that one lakh (100,000) rupees be promised to Murtazai. Shakeel, like everyone else, had no money. Then someone mentioned the fact that if the wife forgives *mehr* on the day of the marriage she'll go straight to heaven. But Hajra Appa[15] told me, don't you dare. This is the only security a woman has. Shakeel said, it's fine if she doesn't forgive the *mehr* – I don't have it in any case. But if I give her

> trouble, I promise that whatever I have will be hers. [. . .] In all of this Niazbhai wandered off. He didn't eat or anything.

It is evident that Murtazai felt close to Shakeel; she recalls his words to her when they got married:

> He said – I can't say it in Hindi – do what your interiority, your inner spirit, tells you. See how your work helps you. Do one thing, achieve it, and then move into the other. The other thing he said was, you and I are comrades, as well as life-partners. That means I won't tell you what to do, like Muslim husbands normally do – don't talk to anyone, or do anything without my permission, or don't wear the veil. You must do what you want to. Just see to it that there is no harm from your actions to the Party, or to anybody.

But most of Murtazai's memories centre on Niaz Haider. She repeats how he enjoined her not to take wages from the Party, not to be dependent on it.

> My brother had stuffed revolutionary spirit in me. He told me to become a whole-timer, but not to take money from the Party. Niazbhai told me never to be financially dependent upon the Party. [. . .] You and I know how people become dependent upon the Party – there is no need to elaborate. This is what makes the Party weak. See, I speak openly, I don't live in fear of anyone. I learnt all this from Niaz Haider. Even if someone did research for 10 years they won't know as much as I learnt from him. He said people get suppressed in the party if they are paid by it. If people give you money they can say to you, why are you late? We pay you. [. . .] No one should work under any pressure.

Thus, while Shakeel enjoined her to keep the party's interests in mind even as she followed her interests and commitment, Niaz Haider told her to maintain a distance between her own family and the Party. For Murtazai coupledom is not the only lynchpin of the family; her brother is also an abiding, and indeed in many ways even more important, presence.

After her marriage, Murtazai moved with Shakeel to Bara Hindu Rao, where the textile mills were: 'The Party asked me to work on the women's front. To train me. Though I had really been trained by my brother.' In the end, she worked in the trade unions for over 35 years, and, she says, learnt many languages through her interactions with workers from different parts of the country. Life in their two-room tenement was hard. The soot and cotton from the factory gave her breathing trouble. After her son was born, Niaz Haider helped out by giving them rent money. He didn't send money on a regular basis, but gave lump sums once or twice a year. And she fondly narrates more stories about his wayward ways. No matter which subject we spoke of, Murtazai's conversations would loop back to her brother.

Unlike for Ushatai Dange, for Murtazai the differences in birth and education among Party comrades mattered less than the differences of status within the

organization. Her attitudes are reiterated by her daughter-in-law Anamika, who is herself the daughter of two whole-timers, and who had studied in Moscow with Murtazai's son. Anamika says:

> Why is my generation not with the Party in spite of our sympathies with its larger ideas? Because of what happened in Moscow. We could feel these differences there. If we travelled to Europe from Moscow, there was huge criticism, a hue and cry. But when children of these Party leaders, XXX's son for example, went all over Europe, it was OK.

She says growing up, she had always heard from her parents that the party used to be like a family 'Comrade means comrade. Always there for you.'

Murtazai then tells me that when she saved some money with great difficulty to send some things to her son in Moscow, she was taunted for being luxury loving by the Party comrades who were much better off. But she does not allow easy nostalgia:

> Even in those days, she says it bothered Party leaders when people like us had many workers or many women behind them. It irritated them so much. This was there from the beginning. Then, as it went on, the Party became like a tree that begins to shed its leaves. [. . .] The *zulm* (cruelty) that was done to me, shall I tell you? But I never got alienated from my cause. If I had, I could have easily joined some other party.

I ask Murtazai if she ever felt there was gender or religious prejudice within the Party. 'Listen', she says,

> everybody tells lies in the Party. Everybody gives a lecture on religion but everybody wears a *janehu* in the Party. When it comes to marrying Hindus and Muslims, well, comrade XXX slapped her future son-in-law who was a Muslim. [. . .] This Party was at one stage number 2 in the country. Then they went into executive committee this, and other committee that! All they wanted is committees.

But Murtazai also emphasizes that there were some comrades who lived up to the ideals of communism. For her, these ideals included a latent feminism, 'Rajeswara Rao was wonderful – he said to us, come sit, you women work the hardest. You work at home and at work and at the Party. He gave all his property to the Party.'[16] Partly because of her brother, it seems to me that Murtazai has a realistic, bordering on cynical, view of all organisations, including the Party. Her conversation emphasizes that to be too bound to a political party is not only unhealthy, but can lead to either nostalgia or alienation from a Marxist vision of equality and freedom. Such a vision should not be confused with the Party organization. She was very angry after Niazbhai's death, she says, because 'in the All-India Party they passed a resolution

about his death, but in the Delhi Party never'. Both Niaz Haider's poems and attitude to life clearly embody the freedom and the passion that she sees as the essence of communism.

Murtazai breaks into Niaz Haider's poetry often and with abandon. She can reel off stanza after stanza without hesitation, and it is clear that she enjoys doing that. Before we part, she shows me a picture of Niaz Haider with Pablo Neruda taken in 1950. My eye falls on another striking image in the album. It is of Murtazai as a young woman, glancing over her shoulder (see Plate 12). I remark how lovely she looks. 'That one? One of my brother's friends took that. Before he shot it, my brother told me: cover your head, you look very attractive like that.'

*

Usha Dutta Verma has appeared in earlier chapters of this book because she joined a commune in Calcutta, and became a dancer and actress with the Party's cultural squad during the Bengal Famine. She grew up in Kendua, East Bengal in a landowning family. Watching her grandmother exploit and cheat poor peasants, she writes in her memoir *Dinguli More*, 'I vowed to myself that day that I would no longer stay in that sinful house. I just had to be free and independent' (10).[17] As I have already discussed in Chapter 3, Usha developed an alternative family in the commune, and was particularly close to her friend Sachi Lahiri.

It was also the Party which made possible the fulfilment of a romantic fantasy. In 1948, Usha was sent by the Party to Assam to work underground. It is here that met her husband to be, Major Jaipal Singh, who had arrived there incognito:

> For some days Biresh Misra had been telling me that a comrade was due from Calcutta. His name was Bhim. He arrived on a full moon-night. I was amazed. I had thought to myself that full time comrades had sickly bodies, for they did not get to eat regularly, were afflicted with ulcers and suffered from many diseases. But Bhim presented a complete counter-image. I had never seen such a beautiful male. Was he English? Or was he Indian? It took me a long time to fathom that out. His eyes possessed a steely glint that penetrated the deepest recesses of the mind. And yet they were also full of wine. Nearly six feet high, he possessed a strong personality. We fell in love in our first meeting. [. . .] As a child, I dreamt of marrying a prince. At any rate, he had to look like one, even if he wasn't one. Meeting Bhim against the backdrop of the jungle exceeded my dreams. [. . .] One day I had to stay over in his cave. It was then that he asked me to marry him. He was so gentle. He never hurt anyone. Because he was a Jat I thought he would be blunt, insensitive and brutish! But this man was completely different: refined and educated.
>
> (32–33, 35)

For Usha, a prince must be tall and fair, and Punjabis, as alien as Englishmen to the Bengali girl, seem to fit the bill, even though she has to work against the stereotype of their brutishness.

Of course, it was not just his looks that cemented their relationship. Jaipal was a red prince: 'I have met very few who were so dedicated to revolution and could endure incredible difficulties happily. I learnt later that he had a rich father; he had declassed himself thoroughly' (33). Usha herself did not feel she could match Jaipal's ability to live on very little:

> Many years later when we were discussing his poverty-stricken party life in front of my daughter in law, she observed, 'Mataji, why do you recall his sufferings and make yourself suffer so much.' What she meant was that he was quite happy wearing torn pyjamas and damaged shoes; he felt fulfilled. Her observation was true. In later years when I was bent double with the weight of children and poverty, he would be going around cheerfully with torn chappals and pyjamas held up by just a knot.
>
> (34)

It was much harder for her to be content with such privations, not because she had a different nature, but because she had to be primarily responsible for the children, whom she raised on a pittance. The Party opened up a new world, and made possible a new family, but both led to much anguish for Usha.

A few weeks after they got married, Jaipal was asked to go to Calcutta and Usha was arrested. Upon her release, she managed to get to Calcutta and started looking for him. Though all the Party leaders were underground, she learnt that Jaipal had been sent to work in Telangana, where the rebellion was in full swing. But she also learnt something else that was, for her, far more disturbing:

> a piece of news that Jaipal had kept away from me during our courtship: it caught me in a fit of impatience. I learnt that he was already married and the father of a son. Even though it was already very late, I could have still left him. But then I would never have been able to forget him. I have berated him throughout his life for this mistake, although I should have realised that 'All is fair in love and war.' His face would turn pale whenever this subject was mentioned. He insisted that even if he had not married me he would never have gone back to his first wife. And if he had mentioned that marriage to me, ours would certainly have never occurred.
>
> (40)

After a year and a half Jaipal returned to Calcutta. The experience of working in Telangana had aged him, Usha writes. He looked 'thirty years older' (40). But she confesses that she did not try and understand how difficult the time there had been for him. She simply could not forget 'that he was already married. [. . .] I never forgave him'. She recounts that Jaipal told her, 'I loved you so much that I did not want to let you know this by any means. I knew that I had told you this you would never have married me' (40). Several contradictory ideologies and emotions jostle here. There is the common-sense idea that 'all is fair in love and war', that Jaipal behaved as he did

because he could not live without her, and that she should have given his desire and love greater credence than she did. There is also the idea that his political suffering in Telangana should have mitigated his errors in her eyes. Then, overriding everything else, there is her hurt at being lied to. Usha does not mention the possibility that they could have worked out another solution had he told her about his first marriage, such as him getting a divorce, or living together out of wedlock.

Within the Party, different types of marriages clashed – those who had had arranged marriages in their youth were faced with ethical dilemmas if they fell in love with a comrade, especially if the first spouse was not a member of the Party. Was it simply prudish and old-fashioned to stay faithful to the first marriage? Was it not self-seeking to leave it? In Usha's case the problem was not that her prince was making the choice to stay or leave his first wife, but that he had decided upon bigamy without telling her.

When in 1956, after many years of being underground, repeated cases against Jaipal and multiple arrests, the couple could finally live legal lives together, Usha felt overwhelmed by the economic problems that faced them. 'My Days' is brutally frank about the pressures placed upon families of whole-timers. Usha describes how she bore the brunt of raising their children on a pittance. Communist women often became the sole earners in order to enable their husbands' political work. The resultant familial dynamic was not always easy to negotiate, especially when the women themselves had been politically active. While underground, Usha had to leave her small son with her sister-in-law. Now, in Delhi, she cobbled together a living:

> I used to go from door to door of the different embassies of socialist countries to fetch whatever translation work I could get. Our family somehow managed to live on that earning. [. . .] Jaipal used to stay out very often. Consequently, my little son would often play under a banyan tree and if storms or rain suddenly broke out he would take shelter at the servants' quarters which were nearby. After work and rehearsals I would return at 9 o'clock at night and look for my son. Once I had found him I would cook and the two of us would eat some vegetables and rice. I could not give my son good clothes to wear. Once a comrade member of parliament, a neighbour of ours, remarked, 'Why is that fellow so shabbily dressed?' Those words still hurt today. Our household could barely survive.
>
> (51)

The problem was not just economic, but exacerbated by the attitudes of comrades; not only did the better-off among them not seem to understand the economic problems of others, Usha suggests, but the Party itself was unfair in paying the whole-timers a pittance:

> I was the only earning member in the family. Later the Party would give Jaipal two hundred rupees. Before his death Saroj Mukherjee had stayed at the Vithalbhai Patel House: he was shocked to hear that Jaipal got only two

> hundred rupees. Jaipal was so gentle that he never demanded anything for himself. Nor did he wish to make his presence felt in any way. Finally, we sent our son to Jaipal's ancestral village. But even there he would not get to eat; at times, he had to live on raw bananas. Despite Jaipal's Party work and my job we lived in dire poverty. It affected my son the most. He never felt affection for his home or for me. And my daughter! That is another story.
>
> (53)

Usha Dutta Verma's and Ushabai Dange's accounts are rare in not shirking from describing the deprivations of whole-timers. As discussed in Chapter 3, many of those who lived in the communes noted the financial difficulties but treated them as necessary parts of communist life. Murtazai and Usha, however, point out that what was harder for the women to bear was the economic asymmetry within the Party. Usha writes:

> I always noticed a recurring feature in the Party of those days. A particular set of comrades would always be given more importance than the others in every activity. A comrade was ill. Because of that – or rather I should say, on that pretext – a sum of 500 rupees (note this was forty years ago) would be spent on him every month. Once a ten-thousand-rupee bribe was paid to procure a passport for that comrade to send him to Moscow. He spent the rest of his days in great comfort there. While I had not even got the 25 rupees for which I had asked. I could not change my sarees till one of them had dried up first.
>
> (Verma 45)

It was easier for richer comrades to practise asceticism gracefully. My mother used to admire a well-known Party leader for having just two saris, washing one and wearing one. But quite apart from the fact that perhaps this comrade did have more than two saris, her wearing just two of them represented a choice, and this choice was a testimonial to her simplicity rather than being the result of penury.

What is particularly poignant about Usha Dutta Verma's narrative is that it registers how women who had to earn a living had to give up on political lives of their own:

> I could not do any Party work after my marriage for it was already far too difficult to combine my job at the embassy with looking after my husband, son and daughter. I used to walk two kilometres to Paharganj to buy potatoes cheaply. During the terrible Delhi summer with its raging 'loo' winds I used to stand at bus stands for hours since I could not afford to hire a scooter [a three-wheeler cab]. Once my son had gone to school after having heard that we had not money to spare in the house. With no other recourse, he came back home soaked in the pouring rain. I had vowed to myself then, 'I have struggled throughout my life. I will keep on fighting. I will never accept defeat.' Once Comrade Surath Palchaudhury had come one evening to visit us from Calcutta. I cannot express my mortification when I could offer him just a cup of tea – with no biscuits. How could someone, who could barely afford

> two and a half rupees for her daughter's socks for school, spend two and a half rupees to buy a packed of biscuits!
>
> (54)

'Fighting' now means just surviving economically. Usha ends her narrative reflecting that 'When I look back I see many desires have been fulfilled. But the hope of revolution that made me leave home so early is still wandering around in a blind alley' (59).

These words might feel like a formulaic ending, but they are deeply poignant, for Usha's narrative registers many losses and makes clear that several of her political and personal desires were not fulfilled at all. The hope of revolution might have been just as far away and as unachieved for women who did have active political lives, but, as Usha's account makes clear, she felt the distance very differently.

*

Kondapalli Koteswaramma (see Plate 16) experienced many of the same highs and lows as Usha Verma, from the heady excitement of life in the underground to scraping the bottom of the barrel economically. But the nature of her participation in the movement, as well as her relationship with her husband and children, was quite different. She was one of the women fighters of the Telangana movement who were interviewed in the 1989 book, *We Were Making History*. In that book, many women who were involved in that struggle testified to both the opening of their political and personal horizons by the Party and the movement and their pain that, once it was over, they were expected to go back to their pre-struggle lives. They had lived through an extraordinary time after having grown up in a society with extreme forms of feudal oppression. Recalling his youth, A. S. R. Chari writes, 'I have seen unforgettable scenes of the Telangana peasant bending low before the landlord or Tehsildar, and prefacing any request with the words "I lick your armpit, Sahib", or "I eat your excreta, Sahib." Only after abasing himself thus, would be have the courage to make his plaintive request. Even though I was only about 12 years old then and had no understanding of economic or political matters, I was furious that a human being should thus abase himself before another' (159). For women, things were exacerbated by sexual oppression; in the words of Kamalamma, who joined the Communist Party:

> My mother was a slave in the house of some landlords. For many generations my mother's people had worked as slaves in the landlord's houses. By then three generations had existed like this. My mother, her mother and grandmother, had all been slaves in the same landlord's house. [. . .] My mother's sister also lived in that house and she died there. None of them was married. . . . Many years ago, in a time of hardship, my mother's grandmother was sold for a measure of rice and a rupee to a Brahmin family. Then she stayed there as a slave in that house, worked there, kept in turn by one or other of the landlords and so it continued down the family.
>
> (Stree Shakti Sanghatana 45)

The communist-led uprising challenged, and to some extent, upturned this order. Even a senior official, the Deputy Director of the Indian Intelligence Bureau, had to admit that programmes of the communists were

> positive and in some cases great. [. . .] The communists redistributed land and livestock, reduced rates, ended forced labour and increased wages by one hundred percent. They inoculated the population and built public latrines; they encouraged women's organisations, discouraged sectarian sentiment and sought to abolish untouchability.
>
> (quoted in Sherman 509)

The movement had ushered in a 'magic time' and after it was quelled, even though the landlords were back, it was no longer possible for them to go back to their earlier exploitative ways.

In her oral testimony for *We Were Making History*, Kondapalli Koteswaramma eloquently describes the political and cultural work she did for the Party, reflects with great acumen on the Party's attitudes to women, and details the women's difficulties as well as the excitement they felt in working for the Party. But, remarkably, she speaks minimally about her marriage with the communist leader Kondapalli Sitaramayya, who brought her into the movement, and never says a word about her tragic personal life in the intervening years.

The publication of *We Were Making History* allowed some of the women featured in it to step out of their domestic lives again: they were asked to speak at meetings, they were interviewed by newspapers, and they connected with one another. It probably allowed Koteswaramma to reflect upon her life anew. In 2012, at the age of 92, she published her autobiography with the Telegu title *A Bridge Abandoned*, which was a runaway success, resulting in an English translation, *The Sharp Knife of Memory*, three years later. This memoir considers some of same events and issues that she had talked about in the earlier interviews, but from a different, more personal and frank perspective. It describes what had happened to her after the Telangana uprising, and why her life took such a tragic turn. While even in the interviews Koteswaramma was extremely frank in expressing her views about the Party (and indeed commented at greater length about its internal workings), her memoir makes her and not the Communist Party the centre of the narrative. While she never understands herself as separate from the movement, there is nevertheless an important difference in that here she is interested in describing how *she* experienced her political faith, both its highs and its lows, how it shaped her relationships with her husband and her children, and how it sustained her when the Party and the family failed or disappointed her.

Koteswaramma was born in 1920, two decades after Ushabai Dange, but she too was a child widow who had been married at the age of 4 or 5 to an uncle and widowed a few years later. However, Koteswaramma's mother was determined to have her daughter marry again. Her husband was worried that by doing so they would be excommunicated by their community. But help came from unexpected quarters;

the child Koteswaramma was attracted to the nationalist movement, especially to 'women freedom fighters', and liked singing patriotic songs, in which she was encouraged by Ramaswamy, a visiting activist of the district teachers' union (Koteswaramma 3). The union decided to support her remarriage, and Ramaswamy approached the Communist Party for a suitable groom from the same caste, because Koteswaramma's father felt that this would make things a bit easier in the village and within the community.

In her interviews, Koteswaramma had confessed that she too

> believed in the philosophy of Karma and I was afraid that the man who married me was destined to die. So I would say I did not want to marry. But the Communist Party boys said: 'no! no!' They would show me families that were well and had children, after a widow remarriage.
>
> (Stree Shakti Sanghatana 128)

The Party thought that Kondapalli Sitaramayya, a young activist, would be ideal. Sitaramayya wanted to remain single and 'dedicate himself to the movement' but C. Rajeswara Rao, a Party leader who later became the general secretary of the CPI, laughed at him, saying that 'it was possible to be married and still work for the movement with devotion, like they all did' (Koteswaramma 6). It turned out, though, that Sitaramayya was from a different sub-caste; so strict were the caste rules that Koteswaramma's father was terrified of the community's reaction. Therefore, the wedding was conducted in the communist bastion of Ventrapragada, the home of Rajeswara Rao, who supervised it with his wife Savitriamma; communist cadres 'took on the role of elders and conducted the marriage' (7–8). Koteswaramma entered the communist family, her abode for many years to come, and later she and Sitaramayya conducted similar weddings: 'We were both the parents as well as the parents-in-law' (Stree Shakti Sanghatana 129).

Sitaramayya appeared to be the ideal communist husband; when certain rituals were performed, he joked: 'Aren't these rituals done so that women don't become widows in their lifetimes? Koteswaramma will always be a wife, never a widow. She need not perform any ritual for this. I bless her as her husband, her god!' (Koteswaramma 10). He also announced that

> Treating the husband like a god is a belief of the past. In this age, husband and wife should live like close friends. [. . .] Savitriamma and Chandra Rajeswara Rao live like this, addressing each other by their first names. We will also follow them. Is that all right, Koteswaramma?
>
> (11)

Thrilled as she was, Koteswaramma continued to address Sitaramayya in the traditional way as *emandi* and found it hard to inhabit this new idea of gender equality. After the wedding, for example, Sitaramayya encouraged her to participate in politics

and to sing in public; she writes that he 'forced me into acting', something that she eventually loved. But, as she testified in an interview,

> In the beginning, it was very difficult. We were scared. What would folks say? If we, respectable family women, came onto the stage, people might think of us as prostitutes. We were so afraid. Perhaps they would say, pointing us out in the bazaar 'this is the woman who acted last night' and mock us. So when I refused to act, Seetharamaiah [*sic*] went on a fast. He refused to eat if we did not act. Now where does a woman have the determination that a man has? If the husband does not eat she suffers. After all we had absorbed these values so completely. I do not know what the culture was like in Soviet Russia, but here, if the husband abused us we just suffered it. We had to do whatever he said. That is how I came into the plays. Yes, I did feel bad that he was forcing me into doing something which I did not like. But what could I do – we felt there was no escape, it was fate – and put up with it! We could act very well in all parts but when we had to act with another man beside us as a husband we found we were unable to act! So the play was weak there. Then they would say that if the play was to be successful we should consider the men here as our brothers, that it was only acting. And so we began to act, and as the applause came, we also grew more enthusiastic.
>
> (Stree Shakti Sanghatana 122–23)

In this interview, she uses 'we' rather than 'I' in describing Party's activities and their gender dynamics. In her autobiography, though, she describes more pointedly what happened to her personally in the marriage and in the Party.

Sitaramayya left her to cope alone with his very traditional mother's prejudices about caste, domestic labour, and appropriate wifely behaviour. This often placed her in an impossible position: for example, her mother-in-law expected her to perform certain arduous domestic chores, which the comrades noticed, and reported to Sitaramayya. Instead of taking it up with his mother, he scolded Koteswaramma saying that everyone knew that she had grown up with parental love and care; did she want '"people to think we are harassing you and making you do these household chores?" Unable to respond, I left the room in tears. I continued doing these chores in Sitaramayya's absence' (Koteswaramma 17). Koteswaramma didn't think that the men in the Party were hypocritical, but just inadequate because socialized in a particular way:

> Our party introduced us to the concept of equality. They told us that a man, a woman, or a Dalit are all equal. They did not stop there. They brought us out of our houses into public spaces. We could do what we did only because of the freedom our party gave its women. But male chauvinism surfaced when any woman overtook men in anything. There was no particular animosity or suppression, just an automatic reaction. But weren't our party men too from the same society? It would take time for these feelings of superiority to go.

> The party believed that these differences would vanish automatically when we built an equal society. No doubt, our party men were better than other men. (66)

When the Telangana movement started, Koteswaramma went underground, along with her husband and many others; for the next five years, she shuttled from den to den, safe-house to safe-house, far away from parents, her two children and for the most part, from Sitaramayya. During these years, her main activities were keeping house for male activists, making copies of important Party documents, and acting as courier. Very occasionally she could meet her children, who would express the desire for the family to be together. Koteswaramma notes, but does not dwell on her anguish, just as she comments that 'Our party leadership in those days was more concerned with the den's safety and about the struggle than about our families and children.' She does not however criticize the Party for this attitude. The Party was an alternative family which facilitated the creation of conjugal units based on like-mindedness, not tradition, but it could not always accommodate the needs of biological families at this particular time. At one point, Koteswaramma was ordered to undergo a painful abortion, and she suffered extreme bleeding and pain because, being underground, she was not allowed to see a doctor. Even then she had no doubt that the bonds forged between comrades were as strong, indeed stronger than those between those between biological kin:

> More than our families and relatives, more than our old friends, the people in the Communist Party were like our family. They were our friends, our brothers and sisters and we all worked together. When we worked together, [. . .] all of us sharing an understanding –we felt so good. And we felt, 'why bother about people whose ideas won't match ours?' We just stayed together with the people who suited our tastes and worked to spread and establish this all over the country. (Stree Shakti Sanghatana 123)

But later, as *The Sharp Knife of Memory* details, she was to develop a very different view of the Party family.

Not just Koteswaramma but her parents too imbibed the Party's values – her mother brought up Koteswaramma's two children, and also supported her daughter's political commitments. When, years later, she was dying, she said she wanted no religious rituals but a 'memorial meeting in the tradition of your party. Inform people from both parties (the Communist Party had split by then) that Anjamma wanted them to work together. I have saved two thousand rupees [. . .] divide it equally between the two parties' (Koteswaramma 106). This was a remarkable gesture because Anjamma had watched Koteswaramma struggle financially and emotionally; indeed, Anjamma had expressed the wish to die because 'I am tired of watching your miseries all my life. I have no energy to witness more' (105).

Ironically, these troubles had begun as soon as the Telangana movement was called off, and Koteswaramma and Sitaramayya finally had the chance to live

together with their children. Sitaramayya had insisted that they shelter a woman, a member of the Party, whose husband had been killed during the struggle. He began an affair with this woman, while also developing serious political differences with the Party leadership. He demanded complete loyalty from Koteswaramma on both fronts, expecting her both to look after the widow (whom Koteswaramma does not name, referring to her simply as 'that woman') and 'suggesting that I should not visit people who had differences with him' (70). When the Party ordered him to go to Rayalaseema for some time, probably hoping that it would end the affair, he refused, upon which he was expelled. It is unclear whether this happened because of the affair or emerging political differences within the Party, but in Koteswaramma's mind, the two could not be separated. Sitaramayya was now a very different man from the one who had married her. Now, when she confronted him about the affair, he retorted:

> Are you jealous now? You suspect her because I move closely with her. You were once a widow. Yet, I married you and gave you some recognition in society. I too can suspect your fidelity if you move closely with someone, can't I?
>
> (71)

Their marriage was now simply an act of social service. He moved out of the home: 'You and Karuna (their daughter) live in this house. Chandu (their son) and I will stay in another place. This is our party's decision' (72). If is doubtful that this was the Party's decision, considering that the CPI had expelled him, but, if it was, it is odd that it was never communicated directly to Koteswaramma.

This could not have been an easy break. Koteswaramma had absolutely no money, and when the Party offered her 5,000 rupees as a kind of compensation 'for the fifty gold sovereigns of gold I had donated during our days of exile', Sitaramayya declared that if she accepted, he would not support the children in any way. This was a hard situation:

> he was a stubborn man and capable of acting on his own ideas. So I decided to suffer for the sake of my children's happiness and did not take the 5000 from the party. Thus, he neither helped me nor did he allow the party to do so.
>
> (73)

Koteswaramma's household was now in crisis, so her mother advised her not to object when Sitaramayya took their daughter Karuna away as well, placing her in a hostel in another city. Koteswaramma could not get any job because she was not educated (having voluntarily dropped out from school after a few years). She heard that Sitaramayya had sold land belonging to her and her mother and bought some for himself. She offers no details here, and it is unclear how he retained any property since earlier the implication is that both had given all their possessions to the Party. But the simple point is that he was not without money while she was left without any.

Koteswaramma mused on the coincidence of the political and personal developments which exacerbated each other:

> The party's split was imminent now, following our family's. I grieved and cried for the party – there was Sundarayya on one side, and Rajeswara Rao on the other. Which side should I take when I respected both of them. Who would understand my problems now? This, along with my financial troubles stressed me out completely.
>
> (74–75)

Like so many other women whose lives I have followed in this book, Koteswaramma could never reconcile herself to the split in the Communist Party, even though she came to terms with her break from Sitaramayya:

> There is only one party according to me – the Communist Party. Even after the split into CPI and CPM, I regularly sent membership to both. Later, Sundarayya suggested that I stop this and said that it is better to contribute to society as a party member than send my membership fees regularly. Party members from both CPI and CPM visited me. But I noticed the instances where my friendliness with one party angered the members of the other. I did not like this attitude and wondered how we could accomplish our goals if we kept splitting the party. [. . .] One day I visited Leela (who now belonged to the CPM) and asked her if she wanted to go see Savitri (who belonged to the CPI) as she was unwell. She agreed and we visited Savitri. But our men privileged politics over human relations and did not want women to meet each other.
>
> (87–88)

But earlier in the book, Koteswaramma describes how women could be just as petty in their sectarianism, and just as prone to blindly following the Party's dictates. On one occasion, they had ostracised Dr. Acchamamba who had differed with the Party on some issue, despite the fact that Dr. Acchamamba had delivered their babies and mentored them. This cold shouldering happened when they were all in jail. Despite being deeply hurt, Dr. Acchamamba defended them from being mistreated by prison authorities, much to Koteswaramma's chagrin: 'I felt ashamed thinking of how different her behaviour towards us was from our petty behaviour towards her' (27).

Koteswaramma rebuilt her life without the Party's help. The Andhra Mahila Sabha, a women's social uplift organization, had announced that it would help widowed and orphaned women to pass the matriculation examination in Hyderabad. She applied for the programme – evidently, she considered herself to be a widow for all practical purposes. Parted from her children and her mother, she was totally alone. But living in the Andhra Mahila Sabha hostel in Hyderabad for five years allowed her to build an alternative community of women. She also started writing fiction (for which she even earned occasional money), penning stories that she had wanted to

tell her children but could not when she was underground (89). She acted in radio plays. And after she matriculated, she worked in a women's hostel as warden for twenty years. Koteswaramma's relationship with her children was complicated, although she made great efforts to stay in touch with her them during these long and difficult years. When Sitaramayya wanted a divorce, her son Chandu asked her not to agree: 'You are both living separately anyway and you don't seek alimony from him. [. . .] My grandparents still consider you their daughter-in-law. So for their sake and mine, please remain as Kondapalli Koteswaramma' (90). Chandu set great store in the maintenance of his patriarchal family, even if only in name, although politically he had become increasingly radical, following his father's footsteps. By then, Sitaramayya had formed the militant People's War Group (PWG) and become one of the most wanted Naxalites in Andhra. Chandu joined him, was arrested several times and finally murdered in prison, as were so many Naxalites during the 1970s.

More miseries were to follow. Koteswaramma managed to maintain a relationship with her daughter Karuna, even though the latter had never lived with her. Karuna had trained as a doctor and when she married one of her classmates, Sitaramayya hosted the wedding to which he did not invite Koteswaramma. Koteswaramma's happiness at the birth of two grandchildren was short-lived; not long after, Karuna's husband died of a sudden fever. Karuna and her children moved in with Koteswaramma and her mother in Vijaywada, but the cohabitation of four generations was not smooth, and nor did it last long. Koteswaramma wanted to stay at home and look after the family, particularly because Karuna worked as a doctor and they needed someone to ensure the household ran smoothly. Karuna didn't agree – a cook could so the work at home, she argued, and pushed Koteswaramma into working as the warden of a school nearby. Koteswaramma had the sad feeling that Karuna did not want her around at home, and so she joined the hostel in order to 'drown my sorrows in work', seeking solace in mothering the students who lived in the hostel. Karuna also became close to some of Sitaramayya's political associates, and the house was full of comrades who shared those political views. They had little time for Koteswaramma and were hurtfully rude to her; Koteswaramma comments, 'I felt that internal struggles within the party were changing the value system among its members' (104). The worst was that Karuna became extremely depressed, unable to cope with life without her husband and, ultimately, she committed suicide, leaving a note that apologized to her mother for leaving her with the burden of two grandchildren. It is remarkable that through these extremely painful events, Koteswaramma was able to retain her hold on life, although she did feel extremely bleak, wondering if she could 'survive with this heart that burns'. She confesses that 'after Sitaramayya left me, there had been days when I had wanted to kill myself'; ironically, it was Karuna who twice prevented her from doing so (109).

Koteswaramma does not say much about how she sustained herself and her granddaughters in the following years, very briefly registering her utter misery at the time. But clearly writing was necessary to the process of survival, for she published a collection of poems entitled *A Pool of Tears*. In a poem of the same name, the speaker

asks male poets to consider the miseries of iconic figures of Indian womanhood – Sita, Shakuntala, Amba, and Draupadi – and understands such miseries as emblematic of her own life:

> What would you call me?
> Do you know my story with its ups and downs?
> I who have experienced the effects of child marriage,
> Forced widowhood and poverty,
> Have now become a srimati [wife].
> I could burn myself as a sati.
> Become one rejected by the husband.
> When my murdered heart spurred me to suicide
> I became a mother leaving behind children
> To keep company to my poor mother
> Even as I left the world.
>
> (quoted in Sridhar and Uma 241–42)

In the last four lines, Koteswaramma's story morphs into her daughter's – Karuna left her children to her mother, but Koteswaramma herself had been unable to do so.

In her memoir, Koteswaramma writes that Party members stopped visiting her, although she kept getting news of Sitaramayya 'whether I liked it or not' (109). He was quarrelsome and increasingly alienated from his own comrades in the party he had started, and, in 1993, at the age of seventy-four, he was arrested. He then sent Koteswaramma messages saying that he wanted to meet her, but Koteswaramma retorted: 'Is it enough that he wants a meeting? Shouldn't I too want to meet him? 'Since I don't, I won't come', I replied' (110). A few years later, he was released on humanitarian grounds, and Karuna's daughter Sudha and her husband brought him back to the house they shared with Koteswaramma. Comrades – 'three men I respect as my brothers' – requested her anew to meet him, which she thought was wrong on principle:

> If I surrender to tradition and express a desire to meet Sitaramayya like a loyal Indian wife, as communists you should convince me against it by saying that this would be an injustice to all oppressed women. How can you all ask me to forget everything and patch up?
>
> (111)

They came up with an extraordinary reply:

> Please don't say that. He did not live happily either. If he were a cruel person, we would not have visited him now. Forget his weaknesses and look at the revolutionary in him and his dedication to his ideology. Respect him for that. If you can see him with a mother's heart, both of you can find some solace.
>
> (111)

They were asking her to become a forgiving mother figure so that she could respect Sitaramayya's political dedication and overlook his husbandly perfidy.

Koteswaramma doesn't comment on this suggestion, but she did go to meet Sitaramayya. It was thirty-six years after he had left her. Upon seeing her, he started weeping. Koteswaramma was unmoved. Unlike him, she told him, she had no tears left after 'years of crying for you, your children, your support, my food and shelter' (111). Nevertheless, she felt enormous grief at his fall from an illustrious past. As the comrades had suggested, she now began to see a parallel between her life and his: 'Sitaramayya's party rejected and side-lined him just as he rejected me. [. . .] Perhaps, some lives are just destined to be like this.' She felt she needed to move away to 'escape this grief' and so went away from her granddaughter's home to an old-age home for 'ageing freedom fighters and revolutionaries' in Hyderabad. When, some years later Sitaramayya died, she returned to bid him farewell. The sight of his body made her again compare the arc of their lives:

> He left his family to serve his party, and when he became old, tired and mentally unstable, his party, which should have looked after him, abandoned him. [. . .] Long ago, Sitaramayya had abandoned me, saying that I did not suit him. Now, his party comrades had abandoned him. Is this what life is all about?
>
> (114)

She shouted at his body: 'You left the family, refused to take responsibility for them and dedicated all your life to people and movements. But who took care of you after all? [. . .] It was your granddaughter, Sudha!'

There is a cruel irony in that Sitaramayya abandoned his biological family for the communist family which let him down, but the entanglement of these two types of family was messier in Koteswaramma's mind. Viewing his body, she confesses, the thought of Sitaramayya's comrades abandoning him aroused 'some unfathomed anger within me'. She insists that she was, at this point of time, unconcerned about his 'personal life after he left me'. but deeply upset that after he had given so much to the Party, it had split into seven:

> Which amongst these seven will establish that equal society we had hoped for? Each May Day, we raise slogans saying, 'Workers of the world unite!' But we never unite ourselves. We fight amongst ourselves. How, then, can the workers unite? Who will bring the revolution? Anguished, I offered a red salute to Sitaramayya, the first to introduce me to revolution.
>
> (115)

As she had earlier remarked, the bifurcation of their family and that of the communist movement had coincided, but now, the latter had split multiply to the point where the vision of revolution had evaporated into thin air. That is why at this moment, Sitaramayya becomes not the person responsible for breaking their conjugal unit, but the keeper of the faith to which she is still attached – she cannot kneel to him as a wife,

but he still deserves a red salute. He is after all, not just her husband, but her comrade. She pushes away the fact that Sitaramayya had left the Party and not just her, and participated actively in the process of splintering it.

Although old, 'my revolutionary spirit was not dead yet', Koteswaramma declares, explaining why she went back to the old-age home in Hyderabad until 2009. But after some years, because that institution only housed people who could take care of themselves, she moved back to Visakhapatnam to live with her granddaughters, who are active in the human rights' movement and therefore 'seem to be following in our family tradition' (119). Koteswaramma titled her book 'A Bridge Abandoned' because she thought of her life as 'full of sadness', spanning two generations that had died, abandoning her. But even as the book recounts these personal and familial sorrows, it also insists on being a testament of the dream of a new society in India that was shared by so many women of her generation.

*

Koteswaramma was lucky in that she had granddaughters who were able to take her in. Others have not been so lucky. Some years ago, when I met Bani Dasgupta, herself a whole-timer, married to another whole-timer Prabhat Dasgupta, I could hardly contain my tears. Her two-roomed apartment in Calcutta was a hovel; a space given to her by the Party. Her husband was dead; she was herself crippled in a road accident and living off a meagre government pension given to 'freedom fighters'. Above all, she was lonely and waiting to die, she told me, because no one came to visit her. She said she felt abandoned by the Party. I remembered Bani's and her husband Prabhat Dasgupta's earlier one-room apartment in Delhi as a beautifully kept, cheerful and welcoming space that was always a haven for me, a place where lively conversations took place, and from where I would always leave with a book that Prabhat wanted me to read. It felt wrong that Bani should be alone in this way. But she was just as hospitable. She laid out a delicious meal for me, and asked me if she should send out for some biryani from a neighbourhood eatery. Bani and her husband, like many other communist couples, decided to have no children, and in the absence of a conventional family as well as the alternative family they had carved for themselves, there is no easy way to grow old in India. I told her I had just come from interviewing another comrade in Coimbatore. Bani said that she was sure that *that* comrade would be in better shape than herself because *she* hailed from a wealthy family. A year later, she was no more.

In India, the biological family still provides the primary financial and logistical support for older people, unless they happen to be very wealthy. If there is a crisis in the care of older people in general, it is multiplied in the case of those people who spent their lives creating alternative political kinship structures that have, nevertheless, not been able to substitute for the family. The women whose lives have populated this chapter remind us of their enormous gains, as well as their great suffering, as they transformed their lives in the service of their political ideals.

Notes

1 It is not possible to detail my reservations about Freud's hypothesis here, but one cannot simply apply it to situations in which the established familial order was so very different – culturally and structurally – from the one Freud suggests the child rebels against.
2 Vimla's parents had already departed from some of the norms of her father's conservative household. Kamala Bakaya, Vimla's mother, had gone to Italy to be trained in the Montessori method, and had come back to a career as a school teacher in Lahore.
3 'The people's flag' refers to a song was written by Irishman Jim Connell in 1889 and inspired by the London dock workers strike. Later it became the anthem of the British Labour Party. 'Utho jago, bhukhe bandi!' refers to the Hindi version of the Communist Internationale. It had been translated by Harindranath Chattopadhyay, who was Mrinalini and Suhasini's brother.
4 For biographical background on Chatto, see Barroah. See also Price (75–170).
5 The first half of this quotation is taken from Sahgal, *A Revolutionary Life* (7). The second half is taken from Sahgal, 'Political Work'.
6 See also Bakaya, Afterword (121–32), which provides the most extended discussion of Suhasini that I have been able to find.
7 In the 1940s, Suhasini lived with Jambhekar in Bombay, but she paid frequent visits to her sister Mrinalini in Lahore.
8 O. Chandu Menon's Malayalam novel *Indulekha* (1889) was written in imitation of Austen's work and it projected just such an ideal, contrasting it with the more traditional forms that the author felt were outdated, and even less moral.
9 *The Lenin Album* (Neuer Deutscher Verlag, 1925). Viewable online at http://contentdm.warwick.ac.uk/cdm/ref/collection/russian/id/420. Accessed 10 April 2018.
10 On the history of this movement, see Altbach.
11 In his afterword to Vimla's book, Ravi Bakaya makes only oblique reference to this turmoil; discussing Suhasini's charisma and methods, he writes, 'Being very young, Vimla was in awe of Suhasini and could not argue with her even when she thought that Suhasini was not right.' Then, too, the Jambhekars were taken as authorities by all young Indians in Prague, and that 'East European communist parties – including the Czechoslovak Party – too were soon to get entangled in internal problems due to Stalinist dictates.' (129).
12 For salient portions of the report, see 'From the Sundarlal Report'. See also Purushotham and Sherman.
13 Pernau argues that the army was responsible for a small percentage of the casualties than the communal carnage that followed, 336. Purushotham writes that 'the rival communist leader Ravi Narayan Reddy cited numerous incidents during which communist guerrilla squads killed unarmed Razakars who had surrendered, noting, "All the Razakars and soldiers killed this way were poor Muslims"'(455).
14 See, for example, Smith; Naqvi, 'The Heart of the Matter'; and Naqvi, 'Nautanki'.
15 Hajra Begum was a senior organizer of the CPI. She divorced her first husband, went to Britain to study Montessori education, and joined the CPI upon her return in 1937 becoming one of a handful of women in the Party at that time. She married Dr. Z. A. Ahmad and, along with him, became a full-time organizer of the Party.
16 C. Rajeswara Rao was an important leader of the Telangana rebellion, and later became the General Secretary of the CPI from 1964 to 1998.
17 All translations from this text are by P. K. Datta.

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7

BECOMING 'INDIAN'

In 1954, a young Indian woman returned home to Kenya during a vacation from her university in England. She was horrified by what she saw: a country under colonial Emergency law, an Indian community racked by fears of being attacked by African rebels, and Africans under constant surveillance, with hundreds of thousands of them being detained on the slightest pretext and sent to concentration camps. Enormous numbers were executed for what has become notorious in history as the savage British response to the Mau Mau rebellion. The experience was deeply formative for her as an anti-colonialist and eventually, a communist.

This young woman was Sheila Didi, a Communist Party and women's activist with the Punjab Istri Sabha, a branch of the National Federation of Indian Women, as well as a prominent lawyer, one of the earliest women to practice in the Punjab High Court. Sheila worked with trade unions as well as with the women's movement, and she had also fought for gender justice both in and outside the legal system. I interviewed her in Delhi in the winter of 2009–2010, and, to get us started, I asked her to tell me how she became a communist. I was astonished to learn that until she was an adult, Sheila would have defined herself as much a Kenyan as an Indian. She recounts her life in Kenya and decision to move to India with both verve and passion, her accounts punctuated by songs that she remembers (she was a very accomplished singer). Other details, although passionately remembered, were recounted in fragments and moved back and forth in time, often making it hard to put the pieces together. I could not consult Sheila again because she passed away a year later.

But the larger difficulty, I came to realize, was that the events and figures that shape this remarkable story have been forgotten or marginalized on both sides of the Indian Ocean. In talking to me about her life, Sheila chose to highlight her earlier years, perhaps because she knew I was more familiar with her later life and work, or perhaps because she was egged on by my surprise and fascination as she unravelled this history. It is also possible that my mother's presence during the interviews shaped this choice,

for although the two had known each other for decades, my mother did not know anything of this past. When people reflect on their lives, they are not only selecting from the past, but they can also forget, lie, get confused, make mistakes or exaggerate. Nevertheless, as commentators have pointed out, 'they *are* revealing truths' even though 'truths of the personal narrative are neither open to proof nor self-evident. We come to understand them only through interpretation, paying careful attention to the contexts that shape their creation and to the world views that inform them' (The Personal Narratives Group 261).

Sheila's personal and political trajectory as it emerges from her conversation resurrects for us the international and inter-racial solidarities, and fractures, of anti-colonial communists as they worked on the ground. But, as will become evident through this chapter, it was very different from the movements of the elite Indians who went to Oxford and Cambridge as a matter of class privilege and became Marxists there, as did so many members of the early Communist Party of India. For her, the movement from one country to another did not follow a longstanding pattern; nor did each move reflect the cosmopolitanism and assurance of the elite. Recent scholarship has opened up the histories of contact between Indian and Africa and discussed the complex ways in which racial boundaries were both breached and re-inscribed as Indians settled in larger numbers in East and South Africa. As Isabel Hofmeyer points out, Indian diasporic communities in Africa 'are often understood to have some automatic or inevitable link to India (and hence a distance from Africa)', while, unlike the later Indian communities in Western countries, they are also 'assumed to have no relevance to India' (101). As will become evident in this chapter, Sheila's story allows us to critically interrogate these suppositions, by opening up a window on the place of Indian nationalists, communists, and socialists in Kenya. Her own journeys, personal, political and literal, offer a different perspective on the transnational circuits of empire as well as those of anti-imperialist organizing, both dovetailing with, and departing from, the better-known stories of Indians in South Africa, as well those of as Indian communists in Europe.

*

Sheila was born in Kenya in 1928, to a mother who had also been born there, and a father who had migrated from India in 1912 as a 15-year-old to work on the Kenyan rail system. 'Someone from his village had gone', she tells me, 'and become a fuel contractor for the railway line which was being built – they used to supply wood from the jungles. It was hard life'. The Railways also employed Sheila's maternal grandfather as a cashier. The Kenya–Uganda railway line, as it was known, was started in 1896, and, at the cost of 6.5 million pounds, it facilitated British occupation and colonization of Kenya. In the words of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, it was 'the single most important event in Kenyan modern history' (Foreword v). The human costs were even higher. Between 1896 and 1901, about 32,000 Indian workers were brought over the ocean by the British, many as indentured labor, nearly a third of whom either perished or were debilitated by the inhumane work conditions that included frequent

attacks by lions. These railway workers accounted for a substantive part of the large-scale twentieth century Indian settlement in Kenya.[1]

The place of Indians in Kenya, many commentators have claimed, has been ignored or downplayed in both colonial and post-colonial accounts (Salvadori 1: x). Shiva Naipaul pronounced that

> The European has been, at best, indifferent to the fate of the Asian in Africa. The Asian represented dangerous competition: he too wanted a share in the spoils of Empire; he tended to have ideas above the station assigned to him and to make demands; he was seen as a possible source of political contamination among the 'unspoiled' natives.
>
> (109)

But as a matter of fact, Indians were crucial to the visions of British colonial administrators in Africa. H. H. Johnston, Her Majesty's Commissioner for British Central Africa, suggested that 'East Africa ought to be the America of India' (Eliot 178). The movement of impoverished peasants and laborers would solve the problem of the landless in India, while Indian traders would help British goods reach African markets (Durrani 135). Indian migration was also seen in Social Darwinist terms as "improving" Africans. Johnston imagined that, as Decle put it,

> whereas the black and white races stand too far apart in development to intermarry and produce a satisfactory medium between the two, there was a great possibility of elevation for the negro by a mixture of Indian blood. [. . .] Industrially, again, the Indian is a link between the Englishman and the negro. Perfectly able to stand the climate, the Indian finds his place as a retail trader, collecting native produce in small quantities for the British wholesale merchant, and distributing European goods to the natives.
>
> (Decle 269–70)

To the disappointment of such colonial visionaries, inter-marrying between Indians and Africans, although not unknown, didn't happen on the scale they had imagined (Eliot 107). Among better-off Indians, a marriage with an African could lead to excommunication for the Indian, with the African being subjected to ridicule.[2]

There was racial segregation in education and in social life, both official and self-imposed. Indian and African children didn't play together, even when they went to common schools.[3] Ngũgĩ recalls:

> the Indian community kept to itself; there was hardly any social interaction between us, except across the counters at the shopping centre. Fights between African and Indian kids broke out, initiated by either side. The Indian dukawalla [shopkeeper], an employer of Africans for domestic work and around the shops, was, more often than not, likely to hurl racially charged insults at his workers. Some of the insults entered African languages. One of the

> most insulting words in Gikuyu was *njangiri*. A *njangiri* of a man meant one who was useless, rootless, like a stray dog. *Njangiri* came to Gikuyu from jangaal, the Sanskrit/Hindi word for 'wild': it would have been what the Indian employer was likely to call his domestic help. In colonial times, in my area at least, I do not recall the tensions ever exploding into intercommunal violence.
>
> ('Asia' 15)

But even as Indians were placed in supervisory capacities or in clerical positions over Africans, both Indians and Africans were disallowed from owning the fertile land of the highlands. Colonial administrators worried that Europeans were becoming indebted to Indian traders; from the turn of the twentieth century, Europeans themselves started demanding that government restrict Indian immigration and invite more European settlement (Mangat 98). Kenya was particularly attractive and lucrative to Europeans, spawning luxurious lives and pleasures that outdid what was available in other colonies. Africans were relocated to the poorest areas, and disallowed entirely from the legislative and municipal bodies in which Indians were given a nominal place (Durrani 134). As Sana Aiyar concludes,

> ordinary Africans were expected to perform a dual function – to make European farms profitable export-oriented enterprises by serving on them as labourers, and to join the colonial monetary economy by cultivating their own land and selling their surplus to petty shops run by Indians to pay taxes.
>
> (9)[4]

This racial fine-tuning is not surprising, and nor is the fact that Sheila Didi was finely attuned to it: 'Indians were fighting [to claim] that we are also British citizens, and we should have equal rights. But because the British had characterized Indians as different from whites and as different from Africans too, there was a racial hierarchy'. Sheila's story evokes the long history of Indian nationalism in Kenya, but also evokes another, which is far less known. This is the history of Indian radicalism in Kenya, which has been obscured in part because of the direction of post-colonial Kenyan politics. While many Indians were undoubtedly racist in their attitudes to African Kenyans, others were crucial in forging Indian-African unity in labour struggles as well as in the anti-imperialist movement. As Sheila talked about her childhood and young adulthood in Kenya, and her coming to political consciousness, she mentioned people whom I had either never heard of, or dimly recall hearing about in my own childhood. In recent years, an alternative scholarship has charted some of this forgotten terrain.[5] The political and social world which shaped Sheila reminds us that the history of radical organizing was also a history of inter-racial collaboration. The place of women within this story remains relatively uncharted, making Sheila's own story doubly valuable.

As a child, Sheila was sent for a few years to a 'Gurukul' (school) in India run by the Arya Samaj.[6] She recalls that spinning and weaving, as prescribed by Gandhiji,

were part of the curriculum. Instead of nursery rhymes, the children learnt political slogans that prepared them for getting arrested, and spun dreams of independence. Sheila recites them for me with vigour: 'Jail chalego? hahn bhai hahn! Mil jayegi, Kya bhai kya? Azadi! Wah bhai wah!' [Will you go to jail? Yes, oh, yes. We will get it! What oh what? Freedom! Wonderful, oh wonderful!].[7] Sheila says that anti-imperialist Indians in Kenya were more organized than their African counterparts because they were nourished by contact with the nationalist movement in India. Every major action in India – such as Gandhi announcing a hunger strike – would result in meetings in Nairobi 'in the Patel brotherhood' or a place called Azad Maidan. 'We would go daily there', she remembers. This double consciousness did not preclude a feeling of superiority towards Africans among a sizable section of Indians, or the sense that Indians could lead them even when it came to articulating their resistance to empire. Moreover, their demands were not identical – Indians wanted their rights as imperial citizens, while Africans wanted land and jobs, some of which they saw as usurped by Indians.

But Indian nationalists in Kenya included more radical elements who took inspiration from the writings and newspapers of the Ghadar Party (see Appendix 2). *Ghadar Ki Goonj*, the organization's newspaper, had a global circulation, including in Kenya. Ghadar leaders also passed through Kenya, and Ghadar ideology, tending towards Marxism after the first World War, influenced several Indian activists there.[8] Although fiercely anti-colonial, the Ghadarites were never narrowly nationalist; both their global reach and their links with other radical movements ensured a capacious commitment to ideas of equality and freedom, even as their idiom and ideology were deeply inflected by the desire for Indian freedom from colonialism. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that many Indians in Kenya who were influenced by Ghadar did not look only towards the 'mother' country for political and cultural inspiration.

Sana Aiyar suggests that this was true of Kenyan Indians in general: 'both the older generation and the new wave of Indian immigrants considered Kenya their territorial homeland, but their politics reflected a racial consciousness that was shaped by the events taking place in their civilizational homeland, India, and by being Indian in Kenya' (119). This idea of belonging could be expressed as a nationalist appropriation of the colonialist notion that East Africa ought to be the 'America of India'. For example, addressing the East African Indian National Congress in Mombasa in January 1924, Sarojini Naidu invoked the long past of Indians in Kenya to claim that although she was

> standing to-day for the first time in my life on the soil of Africa, but none the less, I dare any man, of any nation, to challenge my statement that I stand on the traditional Colony of the Indian people [. . .] naturally and inevitably East Africa is one of the earliest legitimate colonial territories of the Indian nation, going so far back, [. . .] to the first century of the Christian era, going back so far as even hundreds of years before that. [. . .] I stand, therefore, to-day before you as an Indian speaker on Indian soil, the soil that your forefathers have dug.
>
> ('Address to East African Congress' 393)

A few months later, on May 17, 1924, Marcus Garvey's paper *The Negro World* quoted her as saying that in 'In East Africa the natives were so enthused over the message I gave them that they called me "Mama Afrika!" and everywhere I would go they would shout "Mama, come and speak to us"'(quoted in Vahed 338). However, in March the same year Naidu told Indian women in Durban:

> You ask justice from the white man but do you ever ask yourselves if you have been right and just to the African and coloured population? [. . .] You can pay your debts by lifting the status of the Native and coloured people.
>
> ('Address to Durban Indian Women' 409, 411)

She was emphatic that 'South Africa was the land of the black man, of the African' (quoted in Vahed 337). In these different speeches are manifest the ideological and rhetorical manoeuvers of Indian anti-colonial nationalism as it inhabited a world stage.[9]

This double-consciousness pervaded the Indian community in which Sheila grew up. One of the influences on her life was her own father, Lalchand Sharma, who worked with a firm of fuel contractors. 'Never a radical', Sheila says, her father 'was transformed by his experience of spending five years in a British jail'. As Sharma described it in his memoir, *Innocent Prisoner of Tsavo*,

> the Germans had blown up the Railway line several times as part of their First World War campaign mounted from their neighbouring German East Africa Tanganyika). We were alleged to have aided and harboured the enemy during the latest mining that had taken place where we were encamped.
>
> (Salvadori 3:145)

The trial was essentially 'a Court-Martial conducted by the British Indian Army which held wartime authority in Kenya'. Two of Sharma's colleagues were ordered to be shot: 'All the detainees, except me, were ordered to watch the executions; and as part of the strategy of intimidation, the executions were held in public'. Sheila tells me that her father refused to testify against his comrades in return for a pardon. So, he and his friend, Bishen Singh, a partner in a firm of fuel contractors which sub-contracted to him, were taken to Fort Jesus jail in Mombasa, built by the Portuguese in the sixteenth century and converted by the British Protectorate into a prison in 1895. The conditions there were appalling:

> Our cells were six feet by three feet. The doors had iron bars on the top and at the bottom, through which one could see outside by standing up and by lying down. A small toilet bucket was kept in each cell. A dirty blanket, full of lice, was all that passed for our bedding.

The next morning Bishen Singh, was hung in public, 'another victim of the hatred the British farmers settled in Kenya bore towards the Indians for demanding equal

rights'; Sharma's own sentence was commuted to ten years of 'Penal Servitude' (Salvadori, 3:146).

Sheila's father's imprisonment fanned his anti-colonialism, and his prison stories in turn shaped her anti-imperialism: 'He showed us the fort in Mombasa. Hard labour and all that. But prison life proved to be a boon. He was in prison with some very learned persons. [. . .] He began to learn and read with them.' *Innocent Prisoner of Tsavo* describes how one of his prison mates, Lachhman Rao Savle, 'laboriously taught me the Gita's 700 verses by writing them out on a piece of slate [. . .] for which I, a farm boy with minimal education, shall remain eternally grateful. . .' (Salvadori, 3:147). (As a child, Sheila told me, Sharma 'had run away from school, because he had to travel miles and miles to go to school. The teachers would ask him to go gather sticks and wood. And do other jobs. He ran away, beaten by his parents who said no, education was very important. He went away to Lahore and became a peon in Mayo College there. His job was to ring the school bell'.) Upon his release, Sharma worked odd jobs until he found a place as a head clerk in a British solicitor's firm, where he served for 30 years, offering *pro bono* legal advice to poor Indians. He always felt bad that he couldn't appear in court, Sheila recalls, 'and that's when he began to nurture an ambition to make his daughter a lawyer'. Eventually, he ran a provision store in Nairobi.

Sheila was also proud of her mother Shanti Devi's political and social involvement:

> My mother had participated by burning her foreign-made clothes as asked by Gandhiji. [. . .] She got a freedom fighter award in Kenya because she was involved in Jomo Kenyatta's movement. Pandit Sat Pal was an Arya Samaj preacher there – my family was very impressed with him and very closely connected with him – he was a freedom fighter for Kenya, a wonderful person. These people secretly helped Kenyatta and the Kenya African Union. Pandit Sat Pal used to take her to Githunguri, where she taught Hindi to Africans. Through her other Asian women also got involved.

Sheila doesn't give me details, and I am puzzled about why Africans would be taught Hindi. It turns out that at Githunguri, near Nairobi, the Kenya African Union (KAU) had set up Kenya Teachers College and Independent African Schools to offer alternatives to missionary education, and Githunguri became 'a hotbed of Kikuyu political activity' (Aiyar 155–56). Apa Pant, the emissary of newly independent India to Kenya, visited the area, urging Africans and Indians to unite, and the Indian government began to offer aid to African nationalists in several different ways. Jawaharlal Nehru instituted five scholarships for African students to study in India. Antoinette Burton has noted that Nehru did not 'break entirely from the super-structures of intra-colonial interdependence that the British empire had created, and from which India was poised to create a new postcolonial empire' (9). British intelligence in Kenya was infuriated that the Swahili textbooks distributed by the Indian government to Kenyan schoolchildren included a laudatory description of Bina Das's shooting of British Chancellor Stanley Jackson (an act that had so

distressed Gandhi). Thus, the new Indian state quickly appropriated past 'terrorist' radicals, as it cast itself as the champion of anti-colonial activities abroad.[10]

Shanti Devi also participated in Arya Samaj efforts to establish an ashram for destitute African children (Ombongi 128; Gregory 132–36). In these institutions,

> The inmates were taught Hindi, Vedic rituals, and instructed on how to live on a vegetarian diet. They were expected to grow up in accordance with the Vedic teachings and perhaps become a nucleus of the anticipated conversion of Africans to Hinduism under the aegis of Arya Samaj.
>
> (Ombongi 130)

Although the thinking and impetus behind the Arya Samaj educational effort and that of the Indian government's more secular efforts were not identical, in practice the two could co-exist and overlap.

When the Second World War broke out, Sheila's father brought her back from school in Dehradun to Kenya. Schooling in Kenya was primarily in English.[11] The transition was hard for Sheila – although she had finished eighth grade in India, she was placed in the fifth in her Kenyan school. The British teachers there were openly racist, refusing to recognize their students on the streets outside school. One of the most moving and formative experiences of Sheila's young adulthood was listening to Makhan Singh at a public meeting in Nairobi. 'Do you know who Makhan Singh was?' she asks me. I have heard the name, but not much else. Sheila says, 'He was the architect of Kenya's trade union movement, a wonderful orator, and one who passionately advocated the unity of Indians and Africans in Kenya.' Makhan Singh remained unknown beyond a small circle until Zarina Patel wrote *Unquiet: The Life and Times of Makhan Singh* in 2002. This rich biography tells Makhan Singh's life as a stirring but tragic tale. Born in Gujranwala in Punjab (now in Pakistan), Makhan moved in 1927, when he was thirteen, to Nairobi. His father had moved to Kenya seven years earlier to work on the railways, but later decided to open a printing press, where the young Makhan made friends with many Africans, an experience that shaped his lifelong commitment to working across racial divides. By 1934, railway workers had decided to organize themselves to fight the reduction of their wages and status, and in 1935 they asked Makhan Singh, who was then all of 23, to help them organize.

In 1937, Makhan Singh formed the Labour Trade Union of East Africa. One of his earliest efforts was to bring Africans into the union (leading to a massive increase in membership). Soon the union led a series of strikes (including a general strike in Mombasa) demanding an eight-hour working day and a 25 per cent increase in wages. These activities were to proliferate and escalate, and were the beginning of an extraordinary political trajectory which included forming on May Day 1949 (with leading Kenyan trade unionists Fred Kubai and Bildad Kaggia), the East African Trade Union Congress, the first central organization of trade unions in Kenya. Its demands included not only equal pay for equal work, but political rights – freedoms of speech, of meeting and procession, of press, of movement, and of organization.

For Makhan Singh himself, the 'real significance' of these demands 'lay in the fact that they had resulted from the joint deliberations of African and Asian workers for the first time in East Africa' (*History* 82). In all his speeches and writings, he insisted that Asians should learn Swahili and make common cause with Africans, but he also highlighted the exploitative and divisive workings of racial capital in the colony.

Much of Makhan Singh's life was spent behind bars, both in Kenya and in India. On a visit to India in 1939, Makhan Singh joined the Communist Party and started working with textile unions in Ahmedabad, he was arrested a few months later and jailed for two years, and then again in 1944. The colonial authorities made it very hard for him to return to Kenya, and then to stay there, slapping him with repeated deportation orders and arrests. It was only after a long legal battle that he won the legal right to live in Kenya. In the meantime, he continued his trade union and political work and, in 1950, was the first to call for complete Kenyan independence from British rule: "Uhuru sasa" (freedom now) (Jabbal 17; Seidenberg 103–4). Shortly after he did so, he and Fred Kubai were taken into custody, with colonial officers arguing that Africans were 'being seduced from their own way of life by an Asian brand of Communism' and implying that Makhan Singh was the ringleader (quoted in Patel 235).[12] For the next eleven and a half years he was to remain in detention – longer than any other African leader – in uncomfortable and often unbearable lodgings, in remote places like Lokitaung in the north, with severe restrictions on family visits. After the British left Kenya, he was marginalized by Jomo Kenyatta's government and, increasingly, within the trade union movement. As his comrade Fitz de Souza was to write, 'they found his avowed Communist links an embarrassment when requesting funds from the West'.[13]

When he himself was put behind bars by Kenyatta, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o came to realize that 'The positive contribution of Kenyan workers of Asian origin to the struggle of independence has been deliberately played down by European colonialists and their Kenyan intellectual sympathizers and chauvinists of all shades' (*Detained* 93). Usually, this neglect is attributed to the policy of Africanization adopted by the government, but in his prison dairy Ngũgĩ rightly attributes it to Kenyatta's political swing to the right: Kenyatta 'of the burning spear', whom the people had celebrated 'as their coming saviour', now began 'talking an entirely different language' (86–87). Therefore Ngũgĩ pays tribute to Makhan Singh, whose name, he writes, is 'synonymous with the growth of a modern workers' movement and progressive trade unionism' (93). During his years of detention, Ngũgĩ reflects, Makhan Singh

> was constantly visited by the demons in the physical form of prison officers, district commissioners, and other colonial agents, who tried to pressure him into agreeing to leave Kenya and be rewarded for it, or to recant and start working against the Kenya workers' movement and progressive nationalism, with rewards of course, but he refused.
>
> (95)

Makhan Singh indeed turned down offers to return to India as a free man: 'I have no intention of returning to India as Kenya is my home and I belong to Kenya' (quoted in Aiyar 163). For Ngũgĩ, 'it is clear that even Makhan Singh, of Asian origin, derived his strength to say "No" from his roots in the progressive aspects of Kenyan people's culture' (*Detained* 95). But arguably, he also shaped that culture, even as he himself also drew upon progressive aspects of *Indian* people's culture. At the meeting where she heard him as a young girl, Sheila doesn't recall Makhan Singh speaking about communism, but his idealism and pleas for racial equality certainly fired her. (The first time she heard about communism, she says, was from a tutor her father had hired to help with her Senior Cambridge exams, a

> Mr. Verghese from Kerala. He gave me an essay to write on communism. I had never *heard* the word before that. I was 17 or 18 by now. My cousin and I both ferreted out some books and wrote the essay based on that. At least I learnt something about communism then.

In February 1948, Sheila set sail on a segregated South African ship to study in England. She was headed to the University of Cardiff. Because the British high school certification had been introduced in government schools in Kenya, it was possible for her to do so (Mangat 135). She vividly remembers a young white South African girl pulling her mother's dress and pointing to Sheila saying, 'look, mummy, see mummy, the black lady! black lady!'[14] The incident is virtually an echo of encounters narrated by Frantz Fanon on his first visit to Paris, and Ama Ata Aidoo's Ghanaian protagonist Sissie in the novella *Our Sister Killjoy*; in both a white child is struck by the sight of a black body in a space usually occupied by whites (Fanon 112; Aidoo 12). But a 90-year-old white man called Wilfred H. Harrison befriended her, crossing the colour line to tend to her when she felt sick. When he saw her reading Nehru's *Glimpses of World History*, Wilfred gave her a copy of his own book, *Memoirs of a South African Socialist*. Sheila spent hours questioning him about socialists in South Africa. The book is actually conservative, for in it Harrison, who was expelled from the Communist Party, argues that communists are hypocritical in trying to include 'the Natives' (and poor whites) in their programme, for

> they are incapable of knowing anything of the science of industry or a cultured form of social life or any form of administration. [. . .] The purpose of a socialist is to preach socialism and also to preach it to those who are capable of understanding what it means.
>
> (Harrison, 'Expulsion')

Nevertheless, Sheila's encounter with Harrison, her reading of Nehru, and her experience of listening to Makhan Singh were clearly milestones in thinking about the possibilities of both Indian and African socialism.

In Wales, Sheila befriended Kapila Hingorani, who also grew up in Kenya, also became a lawyer, and inaugurated the practise of public interest litigation in India.

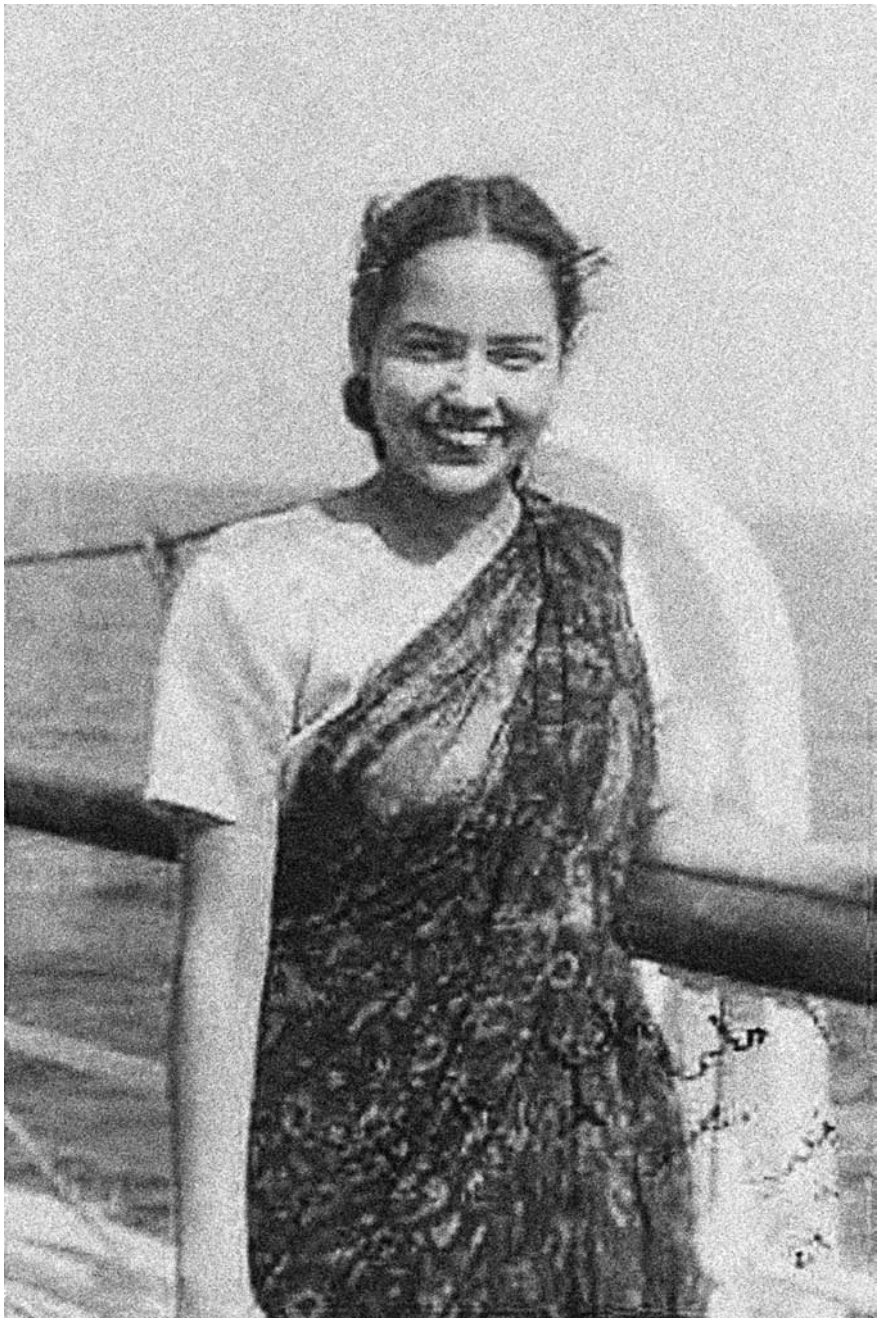

FIGURE 7.1 Young Sheila Didi

(Courtesy: Rahul Diddi)

It was not easy to adjust to Cardiff, for Sheila's English was still not up to the mark. Although Sheila does not mention any racism she might have encountered in England, Hingorani recalled that on her first day there when she stepped out in a white sari, children followed her singing 'here comes the bride!' (Tiwari).[15] Hingorani and Sheila remained lifelong friends. They were the only two Indian students at Cardiff. I regret now that I did not push her more to talk about her life in Wales. What she did tell me was that it was expensive to go back home, so she spent the holidays in youth hostels in London, meeting Indians from all parts of the country as well as from Africa, both in Majlis, an Indian student organization in London, as well as in FEDIND (Federation of Indian Students in Europe/Great Britain).[16] Kapila and she always attended the latter's conference at Easter, where she 'noticed that always communists and socialists stood out'. In London, she noticed demonstrations in front of India House; students were protesting police actions in Telangana:

> Lotika Sarkar was among them. Her father was a big officer in India High Commission. It struck in my mind that the daughter on this side, the father is on the other. This impressed me. I was trying to find my own path.

All in all, this was a heady time to be a student in England. As Zarina Bhatty, who was there during the same years, recalls: 'After many years, the Labour Party came back in power and a new left movement was emerging, welcoming students from newly independent countries' (90–91). Sheila remembers the idealism among Indian students, and recalls learning many radical songs from the Bengalis among them – all her life she was to remain fond of singing.

Bhatty also recalls that the student population in London

> was dominated by Bengalis, most of who came from rich backgrounds and professed communism. However, a majority of them settled back in their aristocratic families on their return home, except a few. A large number of Bengali students had joined the Communist Party of Britain. [. . .] All you had to do was fill in a form and pay your small dues.
>
> (90)

Before independence, Indian students in England had access to Marxist books proscribed at home, and their association with British communists had been a source of worry to the government in both countries since the 1920s. Young Indian leftists were nurtured by teachers such as Harold Laski and E. P. Thompson, and the numbers who had become communists in England were already legion (Mukherjee 99–105). Romance was perhaps inevitable. After the interview with me, she told her granddaughter about her girlish crushes; she was taken by

> this one boy – Pradhov Banerjee, who was fair and handsome and would sing beautifully. I deeply admired him because he often organized political protests and was quite knowledgeable about Marxism. We became quite close. He

> would hold my hand sometimes. He used to say, 'we will love each other, but not fall in love'. I never understood what that meant. When I was at Cardiff, he would write me love letters. He wrote so passionately. Once he wrote, 'You must come straight away to see me, or walk over my dead body!' Later on, I found out that he was sending such letters to three other girls! Only once, he embraced me from behind unexpectedly and asked, 'Does that feel heavenly?' And I said 'yes, yes, it does'.[17]

After graduation Sheila started working for her bar-at-law exam. But then, she tells me, in 1954, 'I went back to Kenya. My father called me. He said I promise I will send you back again, just come to meet us. Today, students can go back for every holiday. But I went after 4 years.' She found she had returned to a changed country.

*

Since October 1952 Kenya had been under emergency rule; the colonial government was trying every means to suppress the 'Mau Mau' rebellion that had started earlier that year. For a couple of decades, KAU had been agitating in vain for political rights as well as land reform, and almost since the beginning there had been serious political differences within the organization. Fred Kubai and Bildad Kaggia, Makhan Singh's trade union comrades, had long represented those who favoured a militant approach, and in 1951 they openly challenged the moderate Jomo Kenyatta. By this time, the Kikuyu Central Association, using the KAU as legal cover, had begun to organize in a more militant fashion. The rebels, who took to guerrilla tactics, called themselves Kiama Gia Ithaka na Wiyathi (Kenya Land and Freedom Army) and their main demand was for greater access to the lands that had been taken away from Africans, as well as for greater political representation. Fred Kubai and Makhan Singh had been arrested in 1950, but their East African Trade Union Congress (EATUC) led an enormous strike that paralyzed Nairobi for nine days and Mombasa for two. Indeed, although the role of trade unions is ignored or downplayed by most accounts of the uprising, arguably they were crucial in radicalizing many of those who became the backbone of the uprising.[18] 'Mau Mau' was the derogatory name given to the movement by the British colonialists, possibly a distortion of Kikuyu words or even of KAU.[19] Till today, particularly in North America, the term is used to indicate 'menacing or intimidating tactics', to 'harass' or 'to terrorize'.[20]

Under emergency rule, reinforcements were brought into Kenya, and a brutal repression began. Even Jomo Kenyatta, who had publically condemned the movement, was arrested along with five other KAU leaders in October 1952. The six leaders were tried and, in April 1953, convicted. According to the Kenya Human Rights Commission, 90,00 Kenyans were executed or tortured, and 160,000 were detained, often without trial, and for years, in terrible conditions. But Caroline Elkins has contended that the numbers of detained were nearly 1.5 million, so that one can only conclude that the British intended to punish the entire Kikuyu population (*Imperial Reckoning* xiv). Only 32 white settlers were killed, but the colonial regime

claimed that it was the rebels who had unleashed a reign of terror. It also perpetuated the myth that the rebellion was the result of a kind of derangement brought about by modernity with which the 'tribal mind' could not cope. As Marouf Hasian has argued, 'many generations of authors and observers helped with the social construction of the particular medicalized knowledge that was used to demonize the Mau Mau' (331). The colonists destroyed millions of documents in bonfires before their retreat, and sealed others.[21]

In 1954, Sheila too was a changed person. Having met Africans socially in London, she realized how rare such contact had been for her in Kenya. She now connected with Africans whom she had met in Cardiff, as well as with Indians who were involved in the anti-colonial struggle. 'My mother and others were very surprised. I did not want to meet our relatives. I wanted to see my friends, then meet Africans, know their customs and all that, participate in their marriages.' Despite the anthropological language of her memories, what Sheila actually did was much more than move beyond the circumscribed network of family, friends, and the Indian community. She plunged herself into political work that further radicalized her: 'Someone had formed a United Nations Association of which I became a member. Because legally Africans could not operate in Kenya.' Such organizations were a cover for their political activities: 'There was a rule that after 5 o'clock in the evening no African could be seen. I remember, if we became late we hid Africans in the boot of the car.'

She also reconnected with advocate friends who had returned after being educated abroad: 'Jaswant Singh. Acchroo Kapila. Fitz de Souza who became later Speaker of the first independent assembly in Kenya, have you heard of them?' These were young Indian advocates who defended the six men identified by the British as rebel leaders – Bildad Kaggia, Jomo Kenyatta, Paul Ngei, Fred Kubai, Achieng Oneko, and Kungu Karumba. They came to be known as the Kapenguria Six because they were tried in remote Kapenguria, 450 kilometres northwest of Nairobi, in order to prevent any show of support in Nairobi. The legal team was headed by D. N. Pritt, who Sheila was later to meet in London, and included Kapila, Jaswant Singh and de Souza, as well as Chanan Singh who was sent by Nehru. Pritt provided legal support to progressive causes around the world, defending, at different points, Bhagat Singh, Makhan Singh, Ho Chi Minh, Julius Nyerere, and the Telangana rebels. The lawyers were not allowed to live in Kapenguria, and stayed in the garage of an Indian shopkeeper in Kitale, 25 miles away (as a result, the shopkeeper was later attacked and eventually driven away by European settlers) (Aiyar 191). It is remarkable but not coincidental that Indians were the bulk of the defence team, as there were hardly any African lawyers qualified and no Europeans willing to do so.

The defence was unsuccessful at the Kapenguria trial. But other trials went on, in makeshift courts with ad hoc procedures. The Indian lawyers continued to work with the accused, most often for no money at all or for a very paltry sum, appearing in hundreds of Mau Mau cases and appeals, and often becoming the target of colonial ire.[22] (Fitz de Souza for example defended over 200 people from 1953 to 1957.) Their presence has been only cursorily noted by most scholarship on the trial. The

exception is historian Rohit De, who has suggested that Indian lawyers were particularly suited to be the defence because colonial law at the time had been honed in India, and was thus in some senses really Indian law. The contemporary fame of the team is captured in M. G. Vassanji's novel, *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*, set in the context of Mau Mau – a young Indian radical charges at the police who are beating and humiliating his friend in Nakuri, far from Nairobi, shouting: 'Stop, or I'm calling his lawyer Mr. Kapila right now' (34). Later, according to De (following others), the word 'Kapila' was sometimes used as a synonym for 'lawyer'.[23]

Sheila would go to the offices of these lawyers to help: 'They got letters in Swahili from the Mau-Mau prisoners – terrible letters full of pain. I could speak and read and write Swahili. Then I accompanied them to court. I saw the trials. Death sentence for the smallest offenses.' Her knowledge of Swahili was important, for although some others on the team could speak it, she was the only one who was also literate in it. Sheila

> also saw a concentration camp. A vast area enclosed with barbed wire. 70,000 people there. I could go because I pretended to be the junior of an advocate. I saw how they lived in the worst conditions. Given terrible food.

The detention camps – which Sheila calls concentration camps – were intended to 'rehabilitate' Kikuyu insurgents; the colonial authorities had concluded that 'Mau Mau was a mental illness induced through oathing ceremonies and could only be cured through psychological reform.'[24] Officials estimated that 80,000 people were thus detained, while Caroline Elkins has claimed that the number was anywhere between twice to four times as many. In 1954, 'Operation Anvil', aimed at eliminating Mau Mau rebels from Nairobi, increased the number of detained thirteenfold within one month (Bagallay 556; Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning* 131). It is worth emphasizing that, for decades after the event, the extent of the colonial violence was routinely underplayed by official and colonial narratives.

Fitz de Souza, one of the Indian defence lawyers, never swallowed the official estimate of 10,000 dead, offering a figure of 100,000 and noting that this was 'ethnic cleansing on the part of the British government' (Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning* 89). Sheila noted the particular harassment meted out to young women: 'I saw young women weeping outside the prisons, police harassing them. This one woman, for example, arrested because someone had come to her house. There must have been a connection there. Those things pained me so much, Ania.' Sheila doesn't seem to have known about the existence of women militants, but she picked up on the crucial role of female networks, a 'passive wing' of 'couriers, scouts and spies' that supplied the fighters with material help and information (Bruce-Lockhart 593). Women were also detained in camps, an issue that has only recently been examined in any detail. But also, entire villages became de facto camps: 'Surrounded by barbed wire and spiked trenches, heavily guarded by armed Home Guards and watchtowers, and routinized by sirens and daily forced labour, these villages were also detention camps in all but name' (Elkins, *Imperial Reckoning* 237).

Sheila certainly noted the way in which harassment and surveillance of Africans became part of the everyday fabric of life:

> My father had started a shop for my cousins, a provision store. It was at a very central location. I was standing in front of that store – there was barbed wire and the police screening Africans asking for their *kipande* or identity cards. I saw poor people protesting that they were on errands for their masters. I stood there, you know, I was just weeping. My tears were flowing. I saw that some Indians were also Home Guards, joining the police in the harassment of Africans. It was so painful.

Although the East African Indian National Congress had demanded the abolition of the notorious *kipande* (pass) system, and had long supported the African demand for land, many Indians *did* join the Home Guards; by December 1952, 2,173 of them had signed up in Nairobi, and in response to a government mandated 'Asian manpower call-up' in 1953, many would affiliate themselves with security forces in other capacities as well (Aiyar 207). Mau Mau rebels had targeted Indian shops and communities, fanning fear and entrenching racial prejudice. There were many within the Congress who wanted the community to distance themselves from the rebels, although both the government of the newly independent India, especially Nehru, and its emissary in Kenya, Apa Pant, were stridently supportive. Indeed, Albert Vincent, Secretary of State for the Colonies even went so far as to blame Russia and India for the unrest (Cleary 234). There were also many ordinary Indians who supported the rebels, both implicitly and in many cases actively. Dedan Kemathu, a legendary rebel leader, had worked in an Indian-owned sawmill and the family provided the fighters with food, helped pass messages and even material for guns, for which they suffered British retribution.[25] Others, such as Lila Patel, also gave food to fighters, and hid them, and along with her husband organized protests for their release. Indian journalists were particularly active in supporting the movement, at great personal risk.[26] The colonial government continued to harass, detain or outlaw Indians such as Makhan Singh who, beyond support for Mau Mau, fought for political, especially labour rights. Scholars have not till now considered sufficiently the support of Indians for the rebellion, while their collaborationist histories have been given more prominence.

Sheila also contacted Pio Gama Pinto, a Goan revolutionary, and the one Indian who is not ignored in histories of Kenya, partly because many African leaders regarded him as exceptional, a 'real African' rather than an Indian.[27] She tells me, 'he is the one who used write all the petitions of Jomo Kenyatta'. I begin to research Pinto and am astounded by what I read: Pinto was one of the leaders of Kenya's freedom struggle, and an associate of Makhan Singh and Fred Kubai. Born in Kenya, he was also sent to India to study, where he was one of the founder members of the Goa National Congress.

A fierce and talented writer, Pinto wrote pamphlets and articles against the colonial government, and manifestoes for various nationalist groups including the East Asian

Congress, and the Kenya African Union. He also arranged to supply weapons and money to Mau Mau fighters. In 1954, the colonial government deported him to Manda Island where he was detained without trial for seven years. After independence, he was elected to the House of Representatives and the legislative assembly. This is the time when, as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o puts it, Jomo Kenyatta's 'assurances to the settlers and imperialist foreigners about their special protected role in an independent Kenya was a slap in the face of the many Kenyans who had fought precisely to get imperialists off the back of Kenya's economy' (*Detained* 88).

Pio Gama Pinto, along with others such as Makhan Singh, was among such Kenyans. Pinto supported the left-leaning Vice-President Oginga Odinga and opposed the new government's steady shift to the right, leading the CIA to closely follow Pinto, and describe him as 'a dedicated Communist' and 'the principal brain' of the leftists (see Central Intelligence Agency). Pinto was assassinated on February 24, 1965, and his killers were never identified, although the government was suspected. A recent Kenyan newspaper editorial also described him as 'the real brains amongst the radicals', and lamented that the inter-racial solidarities of his day have now been forgotten (Ng'Weno). According to Pinto's brother, the murder was also designed to send 'a chilling message to Kenyans of Asian heritage not to rock the boat; soon after close Asian associates of his were deported to India, a country some of them had never seen' (Oloo). Others point out that Pinto had met and had a huge effect on Malcolm X, nudging the latter towards a more radical and Marxist stance; for them it was no coincidence that Malcolm X was killed three days after Pinto.[28]

Sheila and I did not talk about the form taken by politics in Kenya since the early days after Kenyan independence, partly because her conversation with me centred around the formative years of the anti-colonial movement, when such differences could be – and were – put on hold. While the post-colonial 'Africanization' of several East African nations stemmed from the effort to ensure that Africans gained access to both land and the urban economy, what was particularly damaging to the history of African-Indian unity in Kenya was the increasing marginalization of the progressive forces there; on both sides, ethnic nationalism held greater sway, undoing the legacy of Makhan Singh, Pio Gama Pinto, and others who had inspired Sheila.

It is not surprising that as a young Sheila Didi became more involved with the question of Kenya's freedom, she also turned increasingly leftist: 'I came back to England, so shaken. *Maine rolla pana shuroo kita* (I started creating a ruckus). I was a law student. And I started saying there is no rule of law in Kenya. Something should be done.' Sheila was vociferous about the double standards operating in British legal circles, demanding of all the progressives she met: 'what are you doing for democracy in Kenya?' She says that

> one of my co-students, a South African who later became president of London Majlis [. . .] took me to Ben Bradley saying I will take you meet someone who can answer your questions. I met Bradley. Or rather, I met an English gentleman. Only later did I come to know about his associations with India.[29] He told me go to the general secretary of the International Association of

> Democratic Lawyers. . . . I knew that democratic lawyers had helped in India as well.

Within a month, 'I got a letter addressed to Sheila Sharma – that was my maiden name – asking me to address a public meeting on Kenya. I was terrified. I thought I'll go to D. N. Pritt.' Sheila confessed her worries to Pritt:

> I said how can I speak? I am a mere student. My English is so bad. I am a lay person. How can I address a gathering of advocates? Pritt said to me, well, this is your moral duty. You should speak. Speak as a lay person. Give the Indian point of view. I went to the tuck shop one day and a student pointed out posters to me. Do you see this? Your name is there? The posters said: 'There is no rule of law in Kenya. Speakers: Dudley Collard QC. Dingle Foot QC. Sheila Sharma.' Some students had naughtily added Q.C. [Queen's counsel] in pen after my name as a joke.

Speaking at the meeting was clearly an important milestone. After that Sheila became active in the Kenya Committee for Democratic Rights for Kenya and spoke at various forums, including what she calls an 'Afro-Asian Bandung conference' after the big meeting in Indonesia.[30] There 'I was chosen to speak from Kenya because the colonial office was very strict in allowing Africans in. The Party told me I had to do it.' It is not clear to me which party she means – the Communist Party of India, or the Communist Party of Great Britain, but she remembers that to help her prepare, this party sent her Makhan Singh's writings, and other materials. 'I got a lot of claps – not because of me, but because of Kenya, Kenya, Kenya, Kenya' she says, each 'Kenya' accompanied by a clap of her own hands.

After this Sheila contacted radical Kenyans in exile:

> I ran to Peter Mbiyu Koinange, whom I had heard speak earlier in Kenya. He had come with a land petition, thousands and thousands of African signatures and thumb impressions saying we are land hungry. Because he was abroad, that is why he was not imprisoned, like everyone else, including Makhan Singh, in jail for sedition, who had been arrested earlier, along with Bildad Kaggia.

Sheila had also met Dr. Yusuf Dadoo, the great South African leader, and Dr. Naiker. Sheila told Koinange that she was desperate to work for the Kenyan cause. She became a sort of assistant to him, making cuttings from newspapers from all over the world that would help him write his speeches. Sheila also met Joseph Murumbi, who became Kenya's second Vice-President. It is not clear to me in what capacity she worked with Murumbi, who, as the child of a Goan father and Masai mother, literally embodied Indian-African unity. Murumbi was educated in India, and attributed the beginnings of his political consciousness to seeing the operations of caste discrimination there; he later identified as an African (Murumbi was his mother's name).[31] Murumbi stayed in England for nine years in exile after the emergency; during this

period, he says, the 'Indian Government had decided to assist KAU by giving me £8 a week so that I could go around England speaking about Kenya' (Thurston 26). Sheila met Murumbi again decades later in Kenya, she tells me with a smile: 'He asked me to sit. I said nothing doing, you didn't invite me for the independence function.'[32]

Although they worked together in London, Koinange's and Murumbi's politics were to become increasingly divergent after independence, their distance marking the political schisms of post-colonial Kenya. Koinange became increasingly entrenched in Kenyatta's regime and its power games – Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o was to write that 'his politics have never gone beyond the call for an end to the colour-bar in acquitting land, in the holding of public office, and in social life. He remained the educated son of an enlightened chief' (*Detained* 91). Murumbi, on the other hand, was close to the radical Pio Gama Pinto and abruptly resigned after a few months in government.

Sheila's increasing radicalism shaped not only her political activities but also her personal life at the time: 'I was getting involved there with a South African friend. M.D. Naidoo was his name.' Mooroogiah Dhanapathy Naidoo was a South African lawyer who was an active opponent of apartheid and was jailed on Robben Island from 1967 to 1972. Sheila says she hasn't really talked about this relationship much, except to her husband. Naidoo 'wooed me persistently [. . .] saying, see, you are from East Africa, I am from South Africa. We are both Marxists. We are wed to this cause. Like that'. Note that in her account, Naidoo invoked their shared African-ness, not their shared Indianness. Sheila commented on their differences: 'I was interested in cultural events. He was stuck – an organizational kind of person.' But 'I got committed to him, you know.' She took a big step – she wrote to her father, who wrote back saying that he had discussed this with his father as well. The family was clearly liberal enough to let Sheila have her way, unusual given the general conservatism of Indians in Kenya on this issue.[33] She also told some of her close friends in London that she was thinking of marrying Naidoo. One of these friends talked to Naidoo, and reported to Sheila that Naidoo had told him that according to South African laws, he could not marry Sheila. Sheila says that Naidoo told her that,

> a South African marriage would not be valid. Something like that. Either we have to show that we married before this law was passed, or we have to live together, and try to later marry later. I *have* to go back and work in South Africa. This is of course absolutely given. He was such a hard-core activist, M. D. Naidoo.

Sheila was shattered when Naidoo told her that 'we can live like Sir Seretse Khama, or we can part ways'. I find the analogy very odd, because, Seretse Khama, who later became the Prime Minister of Botswana, did marry his white British girlfriend, Ruth Williams, in 1948 sparking the ire of the government of South Africa, which could not afford to have such a spectacular instance of inter-racial marriage just across the border.[34] Sheila underlines how politically committed Naidoo was, and how every movement of his was on orders from the Party. Naidoo himself suggested, in an interview with Julie Frederikse, that he had been sent to India, and then to the UN in

New York by the South African Indian Congress; 'and then after I had completed the mission I came via this country [UK] and was given permission to stay here and complete my law'. Sheila recalls her shock. 'I thought, he can actually contemplate that we part? That's very calculated. I thought this is not commitment. Something broke in me.' After this, she says, could not think of having anything to do with Naidoo.

Sheila did not give me any details about the legal prohibition involved, and the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act of 1949 in South Africa only outlawed marriages between Europeans and non-Europeans. But then I found that there was an 'Immigrants Regulation Amendment Act of 1953' that made such a marriage impossible. A 1913 Immigration Act had allowed wives and children of Indian men who were residents of South Africa to join them. On February 10, 1953, the Minister of the Interior announced that the disparity between men and women was being erased and 'no foreign-born Indian woman married to an Indian resident in South Africa' after that date would henceforth be able to enter.[35] That was the law Naidoo probably had in mind when he told Sheila they could not marry.

Shortly after their break, she left for Warsaw in 1955, 'in the African delegation, by the way. I was to hoist the flag, along with people from other continents. I was chosen from Kenya, which was very much in the news, just as Vietnam was later.' Such bi-annual festivals were organized by the communist WFDY (World Federation of Democratic Youth) and IUS (International Union of Students) and were intended to showcase socialist achievements in the Cold War period.[36] In Warsaw Sheila found herself in long conversations with an unlikely confidante – a Polish Dean at the Faculty of Law; he had sought her out because he was going to spend time in Indonesia and was 'curious about Asian women'. Sheila mused,

> You know how it is easier to talk to foreigners sometimes? I opened up to him, telling him I don't know what I should do. Should I go back to Kenya? The people in Kenya say that Indians they grow up here, work here, but their loyalties are to India. I think I should work in Kenya. But India also has a pull for me, especially the music.

The Polish professor told her that she should work 'best in a place whose culture and language you know. I think your place is in India.'

The same advice was given to her by communist leader Harkishen Singh Surjeet, who came to London. 'I didn't know who he was at the time', Sheila says:

> We had a meeting in Camden Town. Since the Party was underground, we had to go there very carefully. We were instructed not to speak to anyone. Surjeet gave a lecture, and I met him afterwards. I said I am from Kenya, but I don't know what I should do. He said 'come to Punjab. Vimla Dang is there. Come and work with her'.

Surjeet, like Sheila's Polish friend, assumed that because Sheila was ethnically Indian, her place was in India rather than in Kenya, and that she understood India better than

she did Kenya. This despite the fact that Surjeet was personally acquainted with Makhan Singh, and so certainly knew of Indian communists who had made a home in Kenya and chosen to work there. Sheila herself says that her decision to move to India also pivoted around the question of finding a like-minded partner; she tells me: 'I also thought I won't find a Marxist in Kenya. All the boys there are very different.' That's a striking observation considering that so many of the Marxists who had inspired her were from Kenya. But she probably would not have considered marrying an African, and did not know many radical Indians of her own age because she had studied in England. In discussing these issues with me, Sheila was far more open than many other women of her generation. And perhaps for the family, her becoming a communist *in India* was more acceptable than her doing so in Kenya.

Sheila moved to India without finishing her law degree, which she was to complete later in India. She started working in Punjab, where initially she was regarded as somewhat of an exotic outsider. In 1957, she married Madan Lal Didi, a communist trade unionist and poet; my memories of him are as a person who was always reciting verse with a flourish. Both remained lifelong and active members of the Party, and Sheila herself became a lawyer and activist of the Punjab Istri Sabha, a branch of the National Federation of Women. For some young people their life together spelt the possibility of an alternative domesticity: 'They were committed activists, living a sort of Bohemian life, unlike what we saw in our middle class homes' ('Sheila Didi, 1928–2011'). Bohemian or not, the couple remained committed to the Party, with Sheila going on to do extraordinary legal work; for the legal historian Rohit De, she, alongside other contemporary left-wing lawyers, are important too in marrying their professional expertise to their political actions, and thus becoming the real precursors of modern human rights' activists.

Sheila did meet M. D. Naidoo again several times. On one occasion, she remembers, the Women's Federation asked her to go to Durban to attend the ANC Congress there.[37] Sheila laughs heartily at the memory. She found herself having to share a room with Party leader A B Bardhan: 'Bardhan and I stayed together in one room, on a double bed, thankfully it could be separated. We were very happy when we found that it could be! We were there for a while, at least 10 days.' Fatima Meer, the prominent anti-apartheid activist and biographer of Nelson Mandela, invited Sheila to lunch. She had also invited Naidoo: 'So I met him there. Such a surprise for me. During the conference of course I saw him, but he was sitting with his delegation somewhere.' I ask if he remained active as a communist; 'Oh my God', she says, 'He stayed very active. He would be happiest if he was burnt on a stake, they used to say about him.'[38]

*

Sheila's politics was deeply nationalist, but it was not bounded within the confines of the nation-state. As I have suggested, though, it is equally important because it highlights an non-elite international radicalism; this class difference is important and makes her life, and also those of Makhan Singh and other working-class communists,

FIGURE 7.2 Sheila Didi with Ghadar leader Sohan Singh Bakhna

(Courtesy: Rahul Diddi)

particularly valuable. However different their politics and times, it connects Sheila and Makhan Singh with the Ghadar activists of an earlier generation. While the transnational trajectories of many Ghadarite and ordinary communist men are well known, the stories of women like Sheila have not been excavated or received the attention they deserve.

In her book *Brown Over Black*, Antoinette Burton rightly suggests that the 'time has come for new histories of "Afro-Asian solidarity"' (1). Drawing attention to the racialized asymmetries between Indians and Africans, and the ways in which 'the terms of endearment between African and Indian communities were strained at best across the landscapes of decolonization', she asks us to break with 'the redemptive narratives we have inherited from Bandung' (2). Sheila Didi's story is situated within the internationalism that developed in the anti-colonial movements, and which structured the relationships between post-colonial nation- states and their citizens. It shows us that both were also shaped by, but not identical with, the internationalism of socialist movements and countries. To that extent, it may only confirm the dynamic Burton has underlined. It may even be guilty of what Burton has named as 'the politics of postcolonial citation', whereby Africa serves to simply underline and affirm India's own credentials. But, on the other hand, I suggest it also reveals very different kinds of inter-racial conversations, collaborations and betrayals that have been obscured by the more dominant 'Bandung'-type narratives. These histories are

redemptive, but differently so, especially in a time of the escalating racism towards Africans in India, as well as the marginalization of socialist histories everywhere.

Notes

1 For a history of Indian immigration to Kenya, see Mangat. See also Dominic DeSanto.
2 On these dynamics, see Salvadori, 107–8; 172–73. But for a glimpse of other social patterns, see M. G. Vassanji's novel *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*. Some Muslims and Christians claimed that their religions were more liberal because of there was inter-racial mixing in mosque and church; see Herzing (145–63).
3 Indeed, inter-marrying *within* different Indian groups was also rare, leading Italian writer Alberto Moravia to suggest that 'Indians are racists [. . .] on the basis of a centuries-old system' (quoted in Naipaul 117).
4 On this dual function, see also Durrani (135–38) and Mangat (49–62, *passim*).
5 See Patel; Aiyar; Salvadori; Odhiambo; and Frenz. For valuable first-hand documentation, see Singh. For an older and useful account, see Seidenberg. For a book written for young adults that is also useful, see Nowrojee.
6 Although this was not unusual, most Indian children were educated in Kenya. On this phenomenon, see Gregory.
7 Gandhiji's associate Madeline Slade, also known as Miraben, taught English at the Kanya Gurukul in Dehradun.
8 According to Amarjit Chandan (To *Gopal Singh Chandan*), 'Between the two World Wars, Kenya became an underground conduit of the Ghadr [*sic*]/Kirti with Gopal Singh as one of its chief protagonists becoming a middleman for many revolutionaries *en route* to Moscow. The Ghadr [*sic*] Directory of 1934 lists Tirath Ram Bali [. . .] as an employee on the Uganda Railway, who was dismissed for distributing Ghadr in Kenya' (14). For more on this point, see also Durrani (100–3). Durrani even goes so far as to claim that Ghadar ideology and militant tactics influenced Mau Mau.
9 As Hofmeyr puts it, Gandhi, and the Congress 'envisaged India as being contained within Empire: India would attain dominion status within Empire, a dispensation which gave India and Empire a shared boundary' (101).
10 I owe this insight to Rohit De's unpublished paper on the 'The Kenyatta Trial as an Indian Legal Event.'
11 Examination papers were also set and marked in Britain, according to the O-level and A-level system there.
12 The quoted words are those of a British officer. See also Seidenberg (124).
13 As De Souza has reported in an interview, he tried to intercede with Kenyatta to get Singh a position, but Singh angrily told him that he would 'never accept a job that's been asked for' (Salvadori, 3:181).
14 I owe this detail to Sheila's interview with her granddaughter Surina Diddi. I am grateful to Diddi for sharing it with me.
15 She had changed her name from Pushpa Kapila as she was known in the early part of her life.
16 On the emergence of this movement, see Rajimwale (358, 460, *passim*).
17 These words are as narrated to Surina Diddi.
18 The events and dynamics within the movement are far too complicated for this brief account to capture. For a clear if brief acknowledgement of the unions' role, see Anderson (39). See also Newsinger.
19 Evan Mwangi cites Maina Kinyatti's argument that the name 'Mau Mau' comes from a misinterpretation of a statement by a suspect who talked in Kikuyu about *maundu mau mau* 'those very issues' as he was being interrogated by a colonial officer in 1950 (88, 110 n. 3). For more on this question, see also Rosberg and Nottingham.
20 See the meaning of 'mau-mau' as a verb in *The Oxford English Dictionary*

21 The unsealing of some of these records, as well as new kinds of scholarship based on oral histories with survivors, has helped establish the true extent of colonial brutality and fueled the 2009 demand of veteran fighters for compensation from the British state, itself a novel development; see Elkins, 'Alchemy of Evidence'. See also Anderson.
22 For example, Jaswant Singh was declared a prohibited immigrant while on holiday in India; see Seidenberg (115).
23 De, 'The Kenyatta Trial'.
24 See also Bagallay (557). The conditions in the camps are described by Elkins (*Imperial Reckoning* 311–53).
25 As Satish Wason recalls,

> All the damage that was done to our sawmill in those years was done by the British security forces. There was a lot of cruelty. We were all forced to watch when the security forces would bring in truckloads of Mau Mau, live prisoners and corpses. One time the DO – with whom we were friendly – drove in with [a] load of thumbs, a whole heap of thumbs. My God, I've seen a lot of blood. So many dead people, terrible things.
>
> (Salvadori 3:183)

26 For a measured account of the different positions taken by Indians during this period, see Seidenberg (109–42).
27 Aiyar writes:

> Both [Bildad] Kaggia and [Oginga] Odinga claimed that he was 'regarded by many Africans not as an Asian but as a real African.' Insisting that Pio did not represent Indian politics in any way, Kaggia was emphatic that Pinto was the *only* Indian detained during the emergency.
>
> (203)

28 Denis Lesak, 'How Kenya's Pio Gama Pinto Influenced Malcolm X to Pan Africanism.' *Medium,* 4 May 2016, https://medium.com/@denislesak/how-kenyas-pio-gama-pinto-influenced-malcolm-x-to-pan-africanism-597fad5a4c7b. Accessed 8 May 2017. The video has since been taken down but the site is active.
29 Bradley was arrested with Dange and others in the Meerut Conspiracy Case. He also worked with trade unions in the mills, and lived near Parvatibai Bhore in a chawl in Bombay. See Chapter XX in Bhore.
30 The Bandung conference took place in April 1955. I have not been able to trace the meeting Sheila speaks of here.
31 He says that this was on his father's advice: 'identify yourself with the Masai, your mother's people. You are educated and they need you more than my people, the Asians' (Thurston 24).
32 But Amarjit Chandan has written that 'when Kenya gained independence, Koinange sent for Sheila, by then an Indian Supreme Court lawyer, to sit not far from the President at the Independence ceremony on 12 December 1963' (Chandan, Sheila Didi).
33 On this conservative tendency, see Siundu.
34 Because Bechualand was a British protectorate at the time, the colonial government tried to have Khama removed from his chieftainship. Khama and Ruth lived in exile for many years.
35 The act provided that: no foreign-born Indian woman married to an Indian resident in South Africa after the date of [Interior Minister] Donge's announcement [8 September] would be allowed entrance into South Africa nor would the children of a marriage made after that date; foreign born wives of resident Indians married before 10 February 1953 and the children of such marriages could freely enter South Africa until 10 February 1956 but not after that date.
>
> (Riley 38)

36 But as a recent study argues, they were in fact used by young people for all kinds of unofficial reasons; see Koivunen. To obtain a visual sense of the scale and spirit of the conference, see British Pathé (a short video clip of the opening ceremony).
37 In 1991, the first ANC conference to be held in South Africa after the banning of the organization. Nelson Mandela was elected the President of the ANC there.
38 In 1958 M. D. married Phyllis Naidoo, an activist of the Natal Indian Congress, who also joined the Communist Party and eventually became better known than him (earning the appellation 'Mother of the Revolution'). He was sent to Robben Island in 1968, and continued to have the reputation of an utterly dedicated political worker. He and Phyllis had an ugly divorce after he was released from prison.

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BY WAY OF A CONCLUSION

Revolutionary Desires has tried to show how, even when gender inequities were not the primary focus of their political agenda, revolutionary and communist women expanded the stage on which women acted in India. This is why the lives and subjectivities of such women are important to the story of Indian feminism. They enlarged the boundaries of the home and the world, and sometimes exposed the ways in which these two domains had been posed as distinct, at least when it comes to female actors. All politically active women have had to negotiate such a separation, of course. But for communist women in India the attempt was especially fraught because of the complicated attitudes of communist organizations and their male leaders which both disavowed the separation and, in practice, upheld it. Thus, for feminist critics today, it is crucial to attend to women's personal lives, which are so often overlooked by a particular kind of history writing, especially on the left. Nor must these lives be narrowly valorized without a full consideration of women's attempts to change the terms of their public participation. As Joan Wallach Scott writes,

> Simply to assert [. . .] that gender is a political issue is not enough. The realization of the radical potential of women's history comes in the writing of histories that focus on women's experiences and analyse the ways in which politics construct gender and gender constructs politics. Feminist history then becomes not the recounting of great deeds performed by women but the exposure of the often silent and hidden operations of gender that are nonetheless present and defining forces.
>
> (27)

This is the sense of this book too: I have tried to show how gender relations were the prism that refracted the entire spectrum of radical and communist women's activities

in India. These activities included underground or militant actions against the colonial as well as bourgeois state, strike actions and economic mobilizations, the formation of women's organizations, and cultural activitism. They also included attempts to reshape domestic partnerships and personal friendships while reimagining political collectivities.

These attempts reverberate with the endeavors of communist and left women elsewhere in the world, but they are also distinct inasmuch as they are shaped by the very particular vocabulary and conceptions of gender and politics in India. Today, the gaps and omissions in the attempts of these communist women to fashion an alternative world are only too evident –insufficient engagement with questions of caste and rank, for example – and they are widely, and often smugly, remarked upon by critics of the left in India. But, as this book has tried to show, such 'failures' were part of a complex history in which many women attempted to reach beyond the worlds they had been confined in, and thus revised the scope of what it meant to be both a woman and a revolutionary in India.

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APPENDIX 1

Timeline of events mentioned in this book

1882	Bankim Chandra's *Anandamath* (The Sacred Brotherhood) published; Tarabai Shinde's *A Comparison Between Women and Men* published.
1888	Pandita Ramabai publishes *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* (1888).
1913	Ghadar Party founded in San Francisco, first issue of *Ghadar Ki Goonj* published.
1917	Bolsheviks capture power in Russia.
1919	Communist International ('Comintern') founded in Moscow; Jalianwala Bagh massacre in Punjab.
1920	M. N. Roy, Abani Kukherjee, and others establish the Communist Party of India in Tashkent (the CPM dates the formation of the party to this event); All India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) founded; Gandhi launches Non-cooperation Movement.
1921	S. A. Dange publishes *Gandhi vs. Lenin*.
1922	Gandhi halts the Non-Cooperation Movement after the Chauri Chaura incident.
1923	Hindustan Republican Army founded by Sachindranath Sanyal.
1925	Communist Party of India formed in Kanpur (the CPI dates its formation to this event).
1926	Sarat Chandra's *Pather Dabi* (The Right of Way) published; All India Women's Conference (AIWC) is founded.
1927	Tagore's *Char Adhyay* proscribed by colonial administration.
1928	Hindustan Republican Army renames itself as the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association (HSRA); Bhagat Singh and Shivaram Rajaguru shoot British police officer John Saunders; Girni Kamgar Union (GKU) established in Mumbai by Communist Party cadres led by S. A. Dange; women workers picket mills for the first time in India; revolutionary groups from Bengal, Bihar and Punjab meet in Ferozeshah Kotla in Delhi but fail to unite over ideological differences.

1929 Leadership of the Communist Party of India put on trial in the Meerut Conspiracy case; Bhagat Singh and Batukeshwar Dutt throw bombs into the Central Legislative Assembly in Delhi; Yashpal is part of the HSRA attempt to blow up a train carrying Viceroy Lord Irwin.

1930 Surya Sen's Indian Republican Army raids British armories and the telegraph office in Chittagong, Bengal; Bhagat Singh and comrades sentenced to death; Gandhi publishes *The Cult of the Bomb* and the HSRA responds with *The Philosophy of the Bomb*.

1931 Bhagat Singh and comrades executed; Yashpal elected 'Commander in chief' of the HSRA; British intelligence finds an HSRA document ('Our Opportunity', attributed to Bhagat Singh) outlining a Marxist account of the Indian situation; Suniti Chowdhury and Shanti Ghosh assassinate British Magistrate C. G. B Stevens.

1932 Bina Das attempts to assassinate Bengal Governor Sir Stanley Jackson; Pritilata Waddedar leads attack on the European Club at Pahartali, Bengal. The controversial Urdu literary collection *Angarey* is published, leading to the announcement of the league of Progressive writers.

1934 CPI banned across India; Surya Sen hanged; Tagore publishes *Char Adhyay*.

1935 The Progressive Writers' Association is formed in London by Indian writers and intellectuals.

1936 Yashpal and Prakashvati marry while Yashpal is in jail.

1939 Eight-month long strike at Bitia Mills begins in April 1939, a landmark in the history of women's labour activism in modern India.

1941 Yashpal publishes *Dada Kamred* in Hindi.

1942 Communist Party of India is legalized. Bombay commune is established; famine and famine-like situations in many parts of wartime British India; Bombay unit of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) formed; Mahila Atma Raksha Samiti (MARS) formed in Bengal; Gandhi launches 'Quit India' movement.

1943 Kalpana Dutt marries P. C. Joshi; the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA) becomes an all India organization.

1944 Bijon Bhattacharya's *Nabanna* (The New Harvest) is staged; Central Cultural Squad of the IPTA is formed in Bombay.

1945 Kalpana Dutt publishes *Chittagong Armory Raiders, Reminiscences*, Kishan Chandar publishes *Anna Data* (The Giver of Grain) in Urdu; Warli revolt in Maharashtra.

1946 Sharecroppers launch movement (known as Tebhaga) in Bengal; Rebellion in Telengana; IPTA's film *Dharti Ke Lal* released.

1947 Indian independence from British rule; Partition of India; Bina Das publishes her memoirs in Bengali.

1948	Second Congress of the CPI. B. T. Ranadive, leader of the 'left wing' in the Party, takes over. CPI is banned in various parts of the country; annexation of the princely state of Hyderabad by the Indian army followed by widespread anti-Muslim violence. Communist women leave the AIWC.
1949	Yashpal writes *Manushya Ke Roop* (Forms of Humanity). Published in 1964.
1951	First volume of Yashpal's *Simhavalokan* published; Ajoy Ghosh takes over leadership of CPI; CPI decides to eschew armed rebellion in favour of the 'parliamentary path'. Emerges as the second largest party after the first parliamentary elections.
1952	Amrit Rai's *Beej* (The Seed) is published; second volume of Yashpal's *Simhavalokan* published; undivided CPI becomes the largest opposition party in Parliament; 'Mau Mau' rebellion begins in Kenya.
1954	Divorce by mutual consent becomes legal for the first time in India under the Special Marriages Act. Activists from MARS take the lead in establishing the National Federation of Indian women.
1955	Third volume of Yashpal's *Simhavalokan* published.
1956	Sulekha Sanyal's *Nabankur* published in Bengali. English translation (The Seedling) published in 2001.
1957	Vimla Dang writes *Fragments of an Autobiography* (published in 2007).
1963	Harivansh Rai Bachchan publishes his memoirs *Kya Bhooloon Kya Yaad Karoon*.
1964	Communist Party of India splits; Communist party of India (Marxist) established.
1967	Naxalbari uprising.
1969	CPI (Marxist-Leninist) founded in Kolkata. People's War Group founded in Telengana.
1970	Ushabai Dange publishes first edition of *Pan Aikta Kaun* (Who listens to me?) in Marathi. Second edition *Ushakaal* published in 1998.
1977	Parvatibahi Bhore publishes *Eka Rannaraginichi Hakikata* (The Story of a Fighter) in Marathi.
1982	Manikuntala Sen publishes her memoirs *Shediner Kotha* in Bengali. English translation *In Search of Freedom: An Unfinished Journey* published in 2001.
1993	Usha Dutta Verma publishes *Dinguli More* (My Days) in Bengali.
1994	Prakashvati's *Lahore se Lucknow tak* (From Lahore to Lucknow) published in Hindi.
2010–2011	Author interviews with Murtazai Shakeel, Sheila Didi, Sarla Sharma, Bani Dasgupta, Parvathi Krishnan, Shaukat Kaifi.
2012	Kondapalli Koteswaramma publishes *Nirjana Varadhi*. English translation *The Sharp Life of Memory* published in 2015.

APPENDIX 2

Notes on organizations, people and events

All India Women's Conference (AIWC): founded by Margaret Cousins in 1926, the AIWC was the earliest pan-Indian women's organization. Its first concern was reform of women's education. Later it expanded into areas of legal reform of women's political and social status. In 1948, communist women left the organization because of the high membership fee which could not be afforded by poor women. (See Radha Kumar, *The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India, 1800–1990.* Kali for Women, 1993.)

Benjamin Bradley: communist metalworker who was sent by the Communist party of Great Britain to work with communists and trade unions in India. He was arrested and sentenced in the Meerut Conspiracy case.

Ghadar movement: the word *Ghadar* means 'revolution' in Arabic and Urdu. The movement was started by Hindustani Workers of the Pacific Coast, an organization of Indian, mainly Sikh, immigrants in California. It aimed to eliminate British rule in India by armed means. With activists and centres of activity in India, the US, Canada, Britain, France, Germany, the USSR, Iran, China, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, the Philippines, Borneo, Japan, Mexico, Argentina and Brazil, the movement became truly global in scope. (See Maia Ramnath, *From Haj to Utopia, How the Ghadar Movement Charted Global Radicalism and Attempted to Overthrow the British Empire*. University of California Press, 2011.)

Kanpur Conspiracy case: in 1924, many communists, including S. A. Dange, M. N. Roy, Muzzafar Ahmed and others were accused of trying 'to deprive the King Emperor of his sovereignty of British India, by complete separation of India from imperialistic Britain by a violent revolution'. This came to be known as the Kanpur Conspiracy case, and it brought Indian communists to national and international attention.

Meerut Conspiracy case: in 1929, the colonial government initiated a case against 33 people, mainly trade unionists, for instigating a railway strike and for trying to

establish a branch of the Comintern in India. Three Englishmen, including Ben Bradley, were among those arrested. Romain Rolland wrote that the Meerut prisoners 'are for us the living symbol of those thousands of victims in the great combat which to-day is being fought throughout the world to break the yoke of imperialism'.

M. N. Roy: born Narendra Nath Bhattacharya, Roy joined the underground group Anushilan as a young man and helped form the revolutionary group Jugantar. In 1915, he left India in search of arms with which to organize militant action against British rule in India. He travelled extensively in Asia, and eventually reached San Francisco where he changed his name to Manbendra Nath Roy. In 1919, he founded the Communist Party of Mexico, and in 1920, The Communist Party of India in Tashkent. In 1920, too, he met Lenin and entered into significant debates with him and with the Comintern on the question of colonialism. In 1929, he was expelled from the Comintern, having developed extensive differences with many there, including Stalin. He returned to India in 1930 and was jailed by British authorities until 1936. Upon his release, he urged Indian communists to join with Nehru and he himself worked with the Congress Socialist Party. Disappointed with them, he propounded a 'new humanism' and, in 1948, launched a Radical Humanist Movement.

The Progressive Writers' Association (PWA): this organization brought together Indian left-oriented and anti-imperialist writers. It was formally established in Lucknow in 1936; the previous year some writers had met for the same purpose in London, following the colonial government's banning of a collection of Urdu short stories called *Angarey*. The organization brought together some of India's best-known writers over the next three decades under a socialist and anti-imperialist program. (See Rakhshanda Jalil, *Liking Progress, Loving Change. A History of the Progressive Writers' Movement in Urdu*. Oxford University Press, 2014.)

Surya Sen (also spelt Surjya Sen) (22 March 1894–12 January 1934): Revolutionary who led a raid on a British armoury in Chittagong in 1930. A school teacher by profession, he was also popularly called Master Da ('da' is a Bengali suffix meaning elder brother). For details see www.towardsfreedom.in/site/Surya_Sen

Tebhaga movement: the Tebhaga movement was a movement of sharecroppers and small peasants in Bengal in 1946, led by the All India Kisan Sabha, a front of the Communist Party of India. It demanded a two-thirds share of the crop, instead of the one-third that sharecroppers received at the time. The movement was significant in departing from Gandhian movements in its methods, and for the wide involvement of women and tribal peoples in it. (See Kavita Panjabi, *Unclaimed Harvest: An Oral History of the Tebhaga Women's Movement*. Zubaan, 2015.)

Telangana rebellion: the Telangana People's Struggle (1948–1951), an armed peasant uprising against the extremely oppressive rule of the Nizam of the princely state of Hyderabad, and landlords. Conditions under which peasants toiled were appalling and included high taxation, forced labour, and extreme sexual exploitation. Intellectuals and liberals influenced by the national movement had organized the Andhra Maha Sabha, which transformed into a militant mass organization against the Nizam. Eventually, the struggle was led by the Communist Party, spread over several

areas, and was notable for the large numbers of women who participated in it. The Communist Party organized guerrilla squads and through them over 3,000 villages were 'liberated', and a million acres of land redistributed before the rebellion was brutally countered by paramilitary forces of the Nizam and landlords known as *razakars*. When India became politically independent from the British in August 1947, the Nizam refused to become part of the country. The Indian army was deployed to force him to surrender, and when he did, it turned on the revolting peasants. The Communist Party was banned. The struggle was withdrawn in 1951 but forced labour had been abolished. (A good overview, the first to highlight gender relations in the movement, is Stree Shakti Sanghatana, *We Were Making History: Life Stories of Women in the Telangana People's Struggle*. Kali for Women, 1989.)

Warli uprising: movement of *adivasis* (indigenous people) in western India who had been dispossessed from their lands by speculators from different parts of the country who set themselves up as landlords. Warlis were forced to work as sharecroppers, often without payment; they had to pay up to half of the produce as rent and the women were subject to sexual slavery. Godavari Parulekar was sent by the Communist Party of India into the area, and she became the organizer of a sustained Warli movement for social and economic justice from 1945 to 1947. Her book *Adivasis Revolt, The Story of Warli Peasants in Struggle* (National Book Agency, 1975) offers a moving account of the oppression of Warlis as well as the rebellion.

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